

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE



STORIES GREG KURZAWA • TRACIE WELSER • JOHN GRANT • KARL BUNKER
SUZANNE PALMER • GARETH L. POWELL **PLUS** SIMON INGS INTERVIEWED
AND ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK ZONE • FUTURE INTERRUPTED



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#251

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LOOKING FOR REAL ONES

Movies about talentless amateurs making movies and/or people watching movies (or unusually grainy videos) have become such a bore lately, and are such a terrible waste of viewing time. From the conspiratorial weirdness of alien autopsy and all the run-of-the-mill frighteners copied from *Blair Witch Project*, the cult visionary formula is nowadays as rigidly fixed as the limitations of basic painting-by-numbers hobby sets. At the risk of sounding elitist, it now seems that little or no imagination is required on-screen to entertain a generation of undiscerning consumers raised on the generally feeble standards of YouTube content. Too many DVD releases offer scenes of running away in blind panic or cutting away from anything vaguely scary or unknown, and it means that any actually terrifying confrontation of evil forces or ghastly horror is not faced or depicted. What we get instead is avoidance or evasive action in mundane or nonsensical plots – of escape not conflict; overreaction and excessive emotion, not characterisation and performance.

Back in 1969, when David Cronenberg made his first feature *Stereo* using a drama-documentary style, with its voiceover narration of purposefully silent footage (it's about telepathy and sex), genre cinema was still experimenting with formats and so *Stereo* remains watchable for historical interest, even if it is not quite mesmerising. David Blair's groundbreaking *Wax*, or the *Discovery of Television Among the Bees* (1991) is another fascinating indie art video project that explores its quirky ideas with consummate skill and no shortage of inventive pseudocumentary technique in a form that enabled its early transfer online as hypermedia. Even comparatively recently, Jonathan Weiss's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (2000), based on J.G. Ballard's 1970 book, showed how, even in a belatedly millennial adaptation of a New Wave text, there are plenty of intriguing sketches and intellectual perspectives and dizzying surrealism to be found in the analytical material that's based on challenging ideas and clusters of transgressive imagery, not on simplistic imitation of an existing popular cinematic style.

Don't get me wrong. I like Michael Bay's unfairly hated *Transformers* series and have enjoyed all of the recent superhero movies, but *Avengers Assemble* was undoubtedly a corporate product and genre cinema needs more than just fun blockbusters if it is to develop new 21st-century classics. If only the most imaginative writers/directors now entering the industry were to be encouraged to take more daring risks, especially with substantial budgets that permit the realisation of far grander unconventional anxiety-dreams by indie auteurs than we are used to seeing, instead of all the biggest gambles with vast fortunes being left to capitalist parasites like bankers. Unlike 'failed' artists, such individuals are summarily forgiven for all their disastrous failures, like repaired crash test dummies getting another chance, whereas novice filmmakers are so rarely granted any such opportunities.

It is true that Godfrey Reggio's astounding *Qatsi* trilogy is the exception, not the rule. But why is artistic endeavour forced into the fringes? If, as Ballard observes, "we're all in the movies", are we looking outside or inside? The struggle for dominance between originality and mere revision goes on, but is the pace of narrative action (usually with a foregone conclusion!) really more important to modern audiences than a genuinely philosophical viewpoint, and pointed questions fielded without any ready answers?

Tony Lee

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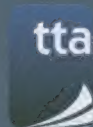
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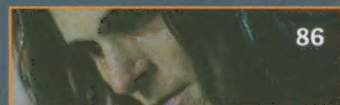
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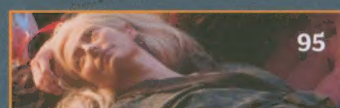
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Us. It must be true, it's on the net: 'John Clute and John Grant, as two of the forefathers of gaslight romance, commented that...' (steampunk.wikia.com)

Brian Aldiss, shrugging off a TIA in late 2013 and two heart attacks early this year, is writing another sf novel before his 89th birthday in August. 'My career in SF is long and – so I'd imagine – pretty well unique.'

Awards. Crawford: Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*. • **Horror Writers Association Life Achievement:** Stephen Jones, R.L. Stine. • **James Tiptree Jr.** N.A. Sulway, *Rupetta*. • **Kitschies.** Novel: Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*. Debut: Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*. Cover Art: Will Staehle for *The Age Atomic* by Adam Christopher. • **Newbery Medal:** Kate DiCamillo, *Flora & Ulysses*. • **Red House Children's Book Awards:** overall winner Rick Yancey, *The 5th Wave*.

World SF Convention. The US bid to hold the 2016 event in Kansas City faces last-minute opposition from Beijing. Voting ends at the London Worldcon (loncon3.org) in August. Meanwhile, the Loncon chairs' appointment of Jonathan Ross as Hugo Awards MC caused instant controversy which Ross detected: he swiftly withdrew.

Iain Banks's *Consider Phlebas* has a new German edition from Heyne, translated 'Aus dem Amerikanischen' ('From the American').

George Orwell was spared the announcement that the 1956 film of 1984 is being remade as *Equals*, a 'futuristic love story'. Kristen

Stewart, playing the female lead, breathlessly comments: 'It's a love story of epic, epic, epic proportion ... I'm scared.' Is it she rather than the hapless Winston who at the end will really, really, really love Big Brother? (*US Weekly*)

Russell Brand, described as 'the usually liberal comedian', tried to silence students' uproar at the Cambridge University Union with 'Shut up you Harry Potter p**fs.' (*Independent*) Asterisks supplied by the newspaper, which shuddered at this 'homophobic slur'; as distinct from, say, a geeks-who-read-J.K. Rowling slur.

Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* looks like dystopian sf, but the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* knows better: 'Lee's futuristic America is redolent of the post-apocalyptic worlds of J.G. Ballard; not science fiction, more the speculative fiction that Margaret Atwood occasionally dabbles in.'

The Weakest Link. Host: 'Dame Judi Dench played which character with a single-letter name in James Bond?' Contestant: 'I'm thinking D or E. [Pause] D!' (BBC1, *In It to Win It*)

Publishers & Sinners. Constable & Robinson, famed for many 'Mammoth Book Of' anthologies, was acquired by Little, Brown on 31 January. • Quercus, with its genre imprint Jo Fletcher Books, was put up for sale in January after a 'significant trading loss' for 2013.

Eldritch Spam. 'The Lovecraft Reference Resource are a new religious organisation established to represent that which is Lovecraftian on the Internet into one place. Our idea is that the Lovecraftian is being established on the Internet

as a growing artistic, literary and religious movement, and that if we can organise this towards one resource, then a more cohesed movement can be organised. [...]

As Others See Us II. Russell Banks, author of 'literary fiction', knows what he doesn't like: 'Anything described by the author or publisher as fantasy, which to me says, "Don't worry, Reader, Death will be absent here."' (*NY Times*) At a stroke the corpse-strewn Harry Potter saga, *Game of Thrones* series and Discworld became non-fantasy. Perhaps they're literary fiction.

Novel Award Shortlists. BSFA. Kameron Hurley, *God's War*; Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*; Paul McAuley, *Evening's Empires*; Gareth L. Powell, *Ack-Ack Macaque*; Christopher Priest, *The Adjacent*. • Philip K. Dick. Anne Charnock, *A Calculated Life*; Cassandra Rose Clarke, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*; Toh EnJoe trans Terry Galagher, *Self-Reference Engine*; Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*; Jack Skillington, *Life on the Preservation*; Ian Whates, ed, *Solaris Rising 2*; Ben H. Winters, *Countdown City*. • *Bram Stoker*. Joe Hill, *NOS4A2*; Stephen King, *Doctor Sleep*; Lisa Morton, *Malediction*; Sarah Pinborough & F. Paul Wilson, *A Necessary End*; Christopher Rice, *The Heavens Rise*. • *Nebulas*. Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*; Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*; Charles E. Gannon, *Fire with Fire*; Nicola Griffith, *Hild*; Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*; Linda Nagata, *The Red: First Light*; Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*; Helene Wecker, *The Golem and the Jinni*.

We Are Everywhere. The kind of fellow who publishes sf news:



'Langford, self-styled leader of the local vigilante group, shared the same basic mental genotype with playground bullies and third world secret policemen.' (Zoe Sharp, *Riot Act*, 2002)

Bored of the Rings. Tolkien imagery continues to delight US political pundits: 'President Obama apparently lost his magic ring. The sun broke through the pall of Republican despair, the fires of Mordor ceased and the spell of buffoonery and pettifoggery that had plagued the elephant herd was miraculously lifted.' (*Washington Post*) Oliphaunt herd, surely?

Thog's Masterclass. *Dribbling Dept.* 'I followed him as he kicked his feet angrily in front of him, as if dissatisfied with their progress.' (Antti Tuomainen, *The Healer*, 2010; trans Lola Rogers 2013) • *Eyeballs in the Sky.* 'Her eyes ran over me like mice.' (Keith Laumer, *A Plague of Demons*, 1965) • *Dept of Gastrology.* 'He felt his stomach drop. Then it seemed to bounce, and cram itself halfway up his throat.' ('Richard Bachman', *Blaze*, 2007) • *Precarious Dept.* 'The generosity of her breasts, like an overhanging cliff, magnetized his gaze; he seemed to expect a landslide.' (Thomas Burnett Swann, 'The Blue Monkeys', *Science Fantasy*, 1964) • *Scandal at the Villa Diodati?* 'Mary Shelley streaked across the table.' (Stephen Marley, *Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures: Managra*, 1995)

R.I.P.

Aaron Allston (1960–2014), US role-playing game designer and author – mainly of *Star Wars* spinoffs, though with several non-franchise novels – died on 27 February; he was 53.

Bill Baker, US publisher, comics historian and author of *Icons: The DC Comics and WildStorm Art of Jim Lee*, died in February at the age of 55.

Neal Barrett Jr (1929–2014), US author who began publishing sf in 1960 and was named SFWA Author Emeritus at the 2010 Nebula Awards, died on 12 January; he was 84. His many novels include the Aldair and Through Darkest America series, contributions to several franchises, and some notable standalone titles.

Jon Bing (1944–2014), Norwegian law professor and sf author/editor of international repute (a guest of honour at the 1997 UK Eastercon), died on 14 January: he was 69. With his close friend Tor-Åge Bringsværd he effectively founded present-day Norwegian fandom and provided its reading matter via many anthologies, the sf line of the leading publisher Gyldendal (1967–1980) and novels – Bing's most recent being *Oslo 2084* (2004).

Erik Blegvad (1923–2014), Danish-born artist who illustrated Mary Norton's *Bed-Knob and Broomstick* (1957), his own translation of Hans Christian Andersen and other children's fantasies, died on 14 January; he was 90.

Alan Burns (1929–2014), UK author who used sf devices in such novels as *Europe After the Rain* (1965), *Babel* (1969, excerpted in *New Worlds*) and *Dreamerika!: A Surrealist Fantasy* (1972), died in December; he was 83.

Stepan Chapman (1951–2014), US author – mainly of offbeat short stories following a 1969 debut in *Analog* – whose one novel *The Troika* (1997) won the Philip

K. Dick Award, died on 27 January.

Frederick Fox (1931–2013), Australian-born milliner to HM the Queen whose one foray into sf was designing the space-stewardess hats for 2001, died on 11 December; he was 82.

Janrae Frank (1954–2014), US author, editor, journalist and fan who with Forrest J Ackerman and Jean Marie Stine edited *New Eves: Science Fiction About the Extraordinary Women of Today and Tomorrow* (1994), died on 12 January; she was 59.

Vic Ghidalia (1926–2013), US TV publicist who edited and co-edited genre anthologies from *The Little Monsters* (1969 with Roger Elwood) to *Feast of Fear* (1977 solo), died on 28 May 2013 aged 87.

Martin Greenberg (1918–2013), co-founder with David Kyle of Gnome Press in 1948 and editor of several early sf anthologies, died on 20 October 2013; he was 95.

Michael Hemmingson (1966–2014), US author and journalist whose first novel *Minstrels* (1997) uses the sf device of an implanted camera converting the protagonist's life into reality TV, died on 9 January; he was 47.

Mark E. Rogers (1952–2014), US fantasy/horror author and illustrator whose work includes the 1980–1998 'Samurai Cat' sequence, died on 2 February. His novella *The Runestone* became a 1990 film.

Bhob Stewart (1937–2014), US artist, writer, editor and fan influential in early comics fanzines and acting as 1960–1963 art director for the Hugo-winning *Xero*, died on 24 February aged 76.

READERS' POLL

Don't forget that the poll closes on April 6th, so if you haven't voted already please do so quickly.

We're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year.

You may vote for and against any number of stories published in issues #244 to #249 inclusive (we publish a list of eligible works here to help remind you). You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think. We'll publish as many comments as we can.

Martin McGrath is overseeing the poll. Please send him your votes using one of the methods below.

To vote by email:

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To vote online:

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We'll publish the results next issue.

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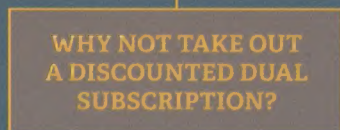
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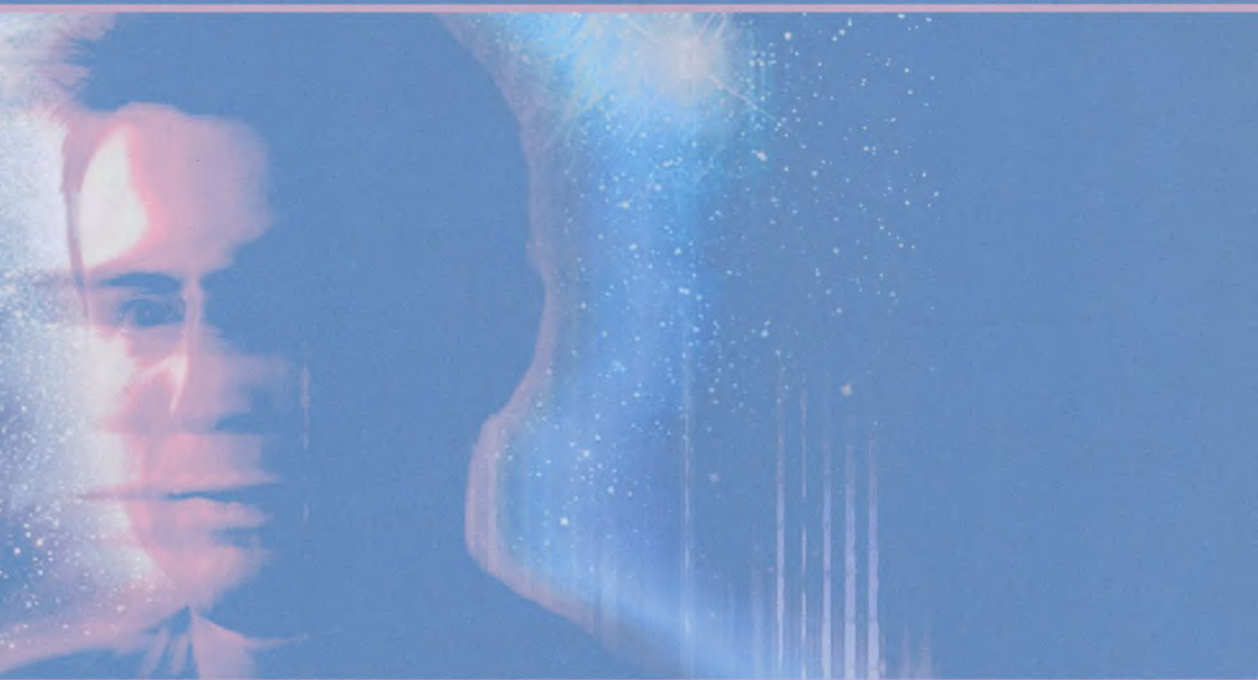


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ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER



JOHN GRANT
GHOST STORY



"WHO WAS IT ON THE PHONE?" says Dverna.

It's the middle of a Sunday morning and she's reading the paper at the breakfast table, still in her robe, the one with the pink-cauliflowers design. She has her legs up under the table so her feet are on my chair. I move them to one side and perch next to them.

"Lindsay."

Dverna looks blank for a moment.

"Connor and Elsa's kid," I say.

Her face clears. "Oh, *that* Lindsay. You should have said. The guilty passion of your youth. She must be grown up by now, isn't she?"

"She's only three, four years younger than I am."

Dverna becomes concerned. "What was she phoning about? Not good news – I can see that on your face. Nothing's happened to Connor or Elsa, has it? They're okay?"

"They're fine." Dverna has met them perhaps half a dozen times, spoken with them lots on the phone. They were the much younger friends of my parents. Since I was a late child, they seemed not quite like adults to me when I was growing up. Of course they were at our wedding – that was the first time Dverna met them. Connor McBride flirted outrageously with my bride, which was exactly what Dverna needed that day, some of my family being frosty and barely polite to her. Ever since then she's called Connor her secret lover while Elsa has called her the co-respondent.

"Then what was it?" She puts the paper down on top of a Rorschach pattern of toast crumbs.

"I don't know how to explain this."

"Madame Dverna, enchanted avatar of distant dimensions, can listen, and guide you through these arcane waters. Spill."

She leans forward, going cross-eyed.

"Maybe its Madame Dverna the mystic wotsit I need," I say.

I'm lost for where to begin. I'm also a bit worried she might pull my head off before I've got this properly explained, if I don't start at the right place. But she's my best friend as well as my wife.

"Lindsay's pregnant."

Dverna uncrosses her eyes in order to roll them. "And you're shocked your First True Love should do such a thing? She's not five any longer, Nick. Why has it got anything to do with you?"

My First True Love. Dverna's heard the story often enough. Once upon a time I was about eight years old and my parents' car broke down in the middle of nowhere. It was another Sunday, which in those times meant that in the Western Highlands of Scotland there wasn't a garage that would answer your knock at the door. It was one of those days when your breath made clouds. Luckily a country bus came by, and we ended up at some grim hotel with grim three-foot-thick walls built out of grim dirty red granite sometime before Julius Caesar venied, vidied or vicied. And, as my father discovered to his fury once he'd signed us in, it was a temperance hotel. The next morning he found out it was going to take a week to fix the car, although it was late in the day before the local garage dared tell him this. The last bus to civilisation had gone. Dad wasn't going to spend another night in a place that broke the Good Lord's Eleventh Commandment – Thou Shalt Have a Bar – and so he began phoning around to see if there was "any escape from this hellhole".

A few hours later, by which time I was asleep on my mother's knee in the hotel's sitting room, Connor and Elsa turned up, ready to give us a lift home. There was a lot of laughter as they piled us all into their car, which was one of those old black monstrosities that looked as if it should have a belowdecks, and I ended up in the back seat jammed next to their infant daughter, Lindsay, whom of course they couldn't have left at home.

During a long drive through the fading light and into the darkness I fell in love with this magical creature. She seemed, so far as I was concerned, hardly to belong to the physical world. Her parents had bundled her all up in white blankets against the cold of the oncoming night, and her face was almost as pale. For a while she wouldn't speak to me, but eventually she prattled happily enough.

By the time we got home my eight-year-old soul was hers.

And then I never saw her again. Well, not for

years – which is as long as never when you're that age.

In my teens I saw Connor and Elsa several times. They'd drifted apart from my parents – one family to Wales, the other to Sussex – and then, when the phones got cheaper, somehow the distances got shorter. I enjoyed their visits, or when we visited them. Mostly Lindsay wasn't a part of those weekends – she had a school that prided itself on organising foreign trips during the vacation periods. There was a day when I must have been about twenty when I was passing through Edinburgh – the McBrides had moved back up north by then – and they bought me a bad lunch at the Balmoral Hotel. Lindsay was there too, with a very silent boyfriend. "But you promised you'd wait for me!" I wailed, then realised I'd embarrassed her.

Which was sort of the way it was. I still cherish that long drive through the night in the back of the car, and there's still always a place inside me where an eight-year-old boy is awestricken by the ethereal five-year-old girl and the ethereal five-year-old girl's rare smile. It was a genuine falling in love, and I never want to lose it. Yet, as the years have gone by, I've barely ever thought of Lindsay. It's her parents who're my friends. That scowly day in an Edinburgh hotel is the way I think of the real Lindsay.

On the other hand, I recognised her voice immediately when I picked up the phone a few minutes ago.

"It seems it *may* have something to do with me," I tell Dverna. "She says I'm the father."

"THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE," SAYS DVERNA, AFTER AN extraordinarily long while. I'm pleased to find my head not pulled off.

"That's what I told her," I say.

"How far gone is she?"

"Three months, a bit over."

"You've not been sneaking out at nights, have you?"

It's a joke question. Lindsay was calling from the family home in Edinburgh. We live in Bristol.

"But of course," I say, loving my wife.

"The girl must have fallen off her trolley."

I grab Dverna's half-drunk black coffee, which is cold, and take a gulp. "She must be. Only..."

"This had better be good, Nick."

"She didn't *sound* nuts."

"Did she sound like that woman out of *Fatal Attraction*? What's her name? Glenn Ford?"

"Close, but no ceegar," I say, then return to the subject. "She sounded quite calm. That's the odd thing. She was phoning me up just to let me know there was a sprog on the way, and that it was mine. She wasn't asking me for anything, doesn't expect me to show any interest in the child unless I want to – just thought it was right for her to tell me."

"And you believe her?"

The question surprises me. It hasn't occurred to me not to believe Lindsay. She's still, I suppose, an angel who descended to earth for a while long ago to sit in the back of a car with a small Scottish boy.

I pick my words carefully. "She wasn't *lying*. I believe she was telling the truth she remembers. Only...only it's not a truth I was ever part of."

"Wasn't it about three months ago you were supposed to be up there?"

Dverna's small brown feet squirm away from me. She crosses to the fridge door, with its mass of bunting.

"Here it is. July seventh to ninth. You were supposed to be having a meeting in Edinburgh with the Sitemaster Hotel Group, only you had the summer flu instead."

"And I lost the job," I say. "But I thought that was earlier. March, April."

Dverna clicks her tongue. "Nope. July it was. You were going to stay with Connor and Elsa."

"Lindsay says I did."

"Ah," says Dverna.

"I haven't been to Edinburgh in five years, maybe seven," I say.

"And you weren't there three months ago. It is incised into my brain that you weren't there three months ago. You spent ten days either sitting on the lav or lying in your bed looking pale and deathly boring and telling me from time to time that, should this be your final descent into the abyss, I was to remember our love had been immortal."

"That's not what Lindsay says. She says I was in Scotland."

"Then she's wrong."

For a second longer I think Dverna is still hugely amused by the whole situation – her husband having his chain pulled by a long-ago memory – but then I see she's frightened by the way I seem as puzzled as she is.

"You'll be wanting to see her?" says Dverna, making the question sound like a death sentence. She clears her throat. "In fact, you need to see her. This is something you need to *solve*, isn't it?"

"They're coming down to London next week so Connor and Elsa can go to the new Waterhouse exhibition. While they're getting culture, she said, maybe she and I could—"

Another mercurial change of mood. "This isn't all a stupid game, is it, Nick?"

I look out through the french window and over a back garden where there are no scattered children's toys to a hedge that is more brown than green.

"How could you think that?" I say.

"I'm coming up towards thirty with frightening speed. Maybe you want to trade me in for a new model."

"You've got to be joking."

I'm appalled she could think any such thing. I thought I was an open book to her, that she could read my innermost thoughts. I guess we all have ideals like that, then are disillusioned when we discover the boundaries between one human and the next are, no matter how close we think we are, impermeable. I can't even imagine being tempted by "a new model". Oh, sure, as she knows, sometimes I feel spears of lust when I see a smile or a well occupied pair of tight jeans, but lust is easy and cheap and superficial. Dverna makes me lust, too, lust like a dog in the noon-day sun, but that's only one percent or less of what she is in my life.

"I've got these wobbly bits on my hips."

"They're one – two – of the reasons I love you."

"Are you saying I've got wobbly bits on my hips? Heartless bastard. So what day is it you're going up to London?"

"Thursday. I said I'd meet her at that restaurant on the Serpentine..."

Dverna puts the back of her wrist to her forehead in a caricature of cheated grief. "Oh, spare me, spare me, *spare* me the details of your assignments with this...this...this *floozy*!"

I'm wondering if I should maybe phone Connor or Elsa and try to work into the conversation a question about whether their daughter's receiving any kind of treatment. Somehow, though, it would seem like a betrayal. I decide to put the decision on this one off until after I've seen Lindsay herself. As I told Dverna, she didn't *sound* nuts on the phone.

What I don't say to my wife is that I asked Lindsay, "How're we going to recognise each other after all this time?" and she replied, "Don't you think, in the circumstances, that's rather an inappropriate remark?"

ON THURSDAY MORNING WE LEAVE THE HOUSE together, me taking a taxi to Bristol Temple Meads station, Dverna setting off on foot to work. She teaches science at Mowberry Comprehensive – or, as she likes to describe it in a loud voice to obnoxious people at parties, "I work in a madrassa where we take young terrorists and brainwash them until they become children."

"See you this evening," she says. She's trying to sound light about it, but I can hear her worry.

"I'll call you from the train to let you know when I'll be home." She looks cold, although it's not a cold morning. "I'll try for the six-oh-three, as usual."

She glances at the sky. "Hope the weather's nice for you."

I'm conscious of the taxi driver waiting, tapping his fingers on the wheel.

"Dverna?"

"Yes?"

I put a finger under her chin and tilt her face up so I can kiss the tip of her small brown nose. She squeezes my free hand very tightly.

"There can only ever be you," I say to her.

"I should hope so."

She walks away quickly, her hard-heeled work shoes going clicky-click-click on the paving stones.

I'M LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET A TABLE BY THE window, so that while I'm waiting for Lindsay to appear I can look out over the sunshiny water at the families in rowing boats. Ducks paddle along in their tranquil fashion or spearhead for the shore whenever they spot someone they sense

has brought breadcrumbs to share.

Lindsay doesn't keep me waiting long.

A slight dip in the volume of conversation in the room makes me turn away from the view of the Serpentine to see the young woman coming in through the door. She raises a hand to the *maitre d'* to say that, no, she doesn't want to give him the white summer jacket she's wearing, and smiles in my direction. She points me out to him and then starts across the restaurant towards me, the *maitre d'* floundering in her wake.

Standing, I pull a chair out for her. I'm suddenly as nervous as an adolescent on his first date.

Lindsay kisses my cheek lightly and sits. Under the white jacket she's wearing a full-length white dress, almost like a bridal gown. Or an angel's tunic. With her pale clothing and pale skin, I feel I should be seeing her not here in the modern world but winged and androgenous in a Renaissance painting. The only colour is around the dress's neck, where there's a chain of pale green leaves embroidered in lace. What I'm trying not to do, as I sit down, is stare at her face.

It's quite square, and white as snow. A few small freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her eyes are the same blue I remember from that long-ago night drive across Scotland; they have that slight lack of focus which the eyes of longsighted people sometimes have. She has a very mobile mouth; her lips are never still, even when the rest of her face is in repose. She wears her dark, curly hair to shoulder-length; her eyebrows are even darker than her hair. There's not a trace of makeup on her face, the only colour being small tinges of pink at the peak of her cheekbones, and yet there seems to be a glow about her, that aura which pregnant women sometimes acquire.

She is as beautiful as she was when we first met, when she was five and I was eight.

And this is what's puzzling me as we make the usual small talk – aren't we both looking splendid, yes, I had a good train ride, she walked across the park from Marble Arch tube station, oh, we could have walked together if we'd known because I came on foot from Paddington. I can see a clear line of descent, as it were, from the magical child who was bundled up warm in the back seat of the car, all those years ago, to the

woman sitting across from me. What I *can't* see, though, is any way the glowering adolescent I annoyed over a bad meal in Edinburgh could have become the Lindsay in front of me. Just to begin with, she appears several inches shorter than she was then – although I put that down to the way ungainly teenagers seem to have longer limbs than ordinary human beings do.

We order a light lunch – salads, a bottle of some innocuous German white wine. I'm not really in the mood for eating. I'm entranced by this creature, just as I once was. If I were younger, I'd say I was falling in love with her, but it isn't that. I wish in a way it were. That would be, somehow, easier to cope with.

What I do know is that, if indeed Lindsay is pregnant, then I'm not the father. We spent no night of passion together. I know this for a certainty. In the old tales men lost themselves in Faeryland and dallied with the Queen, yet later forgot entirely their lovemaking. They forgot only because the Queen could cast a spell upon their minds; otherwise they'd have remembered everything until the last breath left their body. It would surely be this way with Lindsay. Surely there'd be some kind of body-memory? Surely?

Yet who she is is a mystery to me. I hardly dare even touch her hand.

We wait until the food's arrived before, moving carefully and warily like participants in a minuet, we approach the reason for our being here.

"I'm not asking you to bear any...paternal responsibility, Nick," she says, spearing a slice of tomato.

"Before we even start going into that," I say, "I think we need to sort out what actually happened."

"You said that on the phone."

"Tell me the story from your side."

"You're serious?"

"I really am."

She smiles. "I'm not sure I like the notion of having to remind you."

"That's the trouble, Lindsay. It's not a reminder. I don't have any knowledge of this – and I'm not pretending." I remember what Dverna said the other day. "I'm not trying to play any kind of stupid game. I truly don't know what's going on."

She sighs, and reaches out her hand to place it over mine on the table. Her touch is cool and dry, as I imagined it would be.

"Well, you remember, back in July, you came and stayed with us for that business meeting you—"

"No, Lindsay. I *don't* remember that. I had to cancel. I had the flu."

"You seemed a little under the weather, but—"

"I was in Bristol. I never even got as far as the station. I had to cancel my appointment, and I lost the job because of it." Not that there weren't plenty of other jobs, because there's always demand for a freelance accountant, but the Site-master contract was one I'd been particularly keen to nail down. *C'est la vie*.

"I'm trying to tell you something," says Lindsay.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have interrupted."

"You were a little under the weather, I said. I don't mean you were sniffing or feverish, or anything like that. You seemed a little...confused, maybe? There was something artificial about you, as if you were playing a role, like one does in front of people one doesn't know very well. Dad said later you seemed so out of kilter with your normal self he could have passed you in the street without recognising you. Me, I hadn't seen you since I was, what, fourteen, fifteen, so you didn't seem so strange to me, but I could still tell..." She takes a deep breath. "You don't do drugs, do you?"

"Just single malt whisky, and then not often enough."

"We wondered, the three of us, after you'd left, if that was why you seemed so... Of course, Mum and Dad didn't know what else had happened while you were there." She stares at me meaningfully with those cloudy blue eyes.

The McBrides have one of those big old tall houses a couple of miles south of Edinburgh's centre, built of red sandstone and built to last. Most of the other houses up and down the street have been converted for flats or into hotels – well, bed-and-breakfasts, really. Where the McBrides sometimes put houseguests is in a small stone shed at the bottom of the back garden – a "guest chalet," as Elsa likes grandly to call it. It was probably a stable at one point. Now

it has a comfortable little bedroom, with a loo and a shower room off it. Just right for a night or three; any longer and it'd start to get claustrophobic, I'd guess. But there's more privacy than in the main house.

I arrived, so Lindsay tells me, in the middle of the Thursday evening. My train had got in late, having sat for a couple of hours outside Newcastle for no reason anyone had ever thought to tell us. The McBrides had held dinner for me – which was easy because, it being summer, dinner was a cold chicken curry salad, one of Elsa's specialities. We sat around the table long after we'd finished eating. I said no to the port Connor produced, because I wanted to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for my meeting with the Site-master people the next day. And then off down the garden path I trotted...

"You were really energised when you got home the next day," says Lindsay. She's stroking the back of my hand with her thumb, the kind of gesture longstanding lovers make. "You said the meeting went really well and you were certain the job was yours."

When I got home, she tells me, it was about one o'clock and she was alone in the house. Connor and Elsa were still out at work, and weren't expected home until seven. Lindsay, who'd completed her finals in biochemistry a couple of weeks earlier, was basically just having fun lolling around the house and relaxing with books.

"Nothing for it but you were going to take me out to lunch at the Haddon House to celebrate, which we did." She has the very clear, almost accentless voice you sometimes find in Scots people, with the same timbre as a choir-boy's singing. She doesn't say why it was we both ended up in the "guest chalet," just that this was where we went when we got home from lunch. There's no embarrassment about her, no girlish blushes. She's quite matter-of-fact, and amused more than anything else.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have allowed this to happen. It was a monumental abuse of hospitality. Your dad'll be wanting to beat me to a pulp."

She chuckles. "You didn't have any choice in the matter. It was my idea. Do you remember that time when we were both wee, Nick, and we

were taken for a long ride in that awful old boat of a car Dad used to have?"

"I remember it."

"I fell in love with you then, Nick, and I've never completely fallen out of it again."

"I know what you mean. But—"

"But what, Nick?"

I was about to say to her that all my life I've felt that same way, except that it's the eight-year-old boy who's loving the five-year-old girl, and the situation, and the memory of an encounter that was special and shining and greater than life, and can never be repeated. But I bite the words back, realising how cruelly they might strike her, as if the grown-up Lindsay was valueless.

I mumble something vacuous about the past being hard to recapture.

"Oh, we had our merry moments, you and I," she says after a pause. "The room was full of sunlight and there was a sea gull in the garden telling all the other birds this was his own special territory. And then, finally, I realised what time it was and that I'd better run inside and have a bath to wash the smell of sex off me before Mum and Dad got home." She chuckles again.

I can't imagine what her face would look like in passion.

Her eyes are serious once more. "And you can remember *nothing* of this, Nick?"

I play the gallant. "I wish I did. You're a very lovely woman, Lindsay." I almost called her a young woman, but caught myself in time.

"Nor the evening? I think Mum was fairly sure something had been going on, but she didn't know what and she wasn't about to ask. And Dad – well, you know Dad. All evening long it was a secret that just you and I shared."

Once again I'm struck by how badly this doppelgänger of mine behaved. Connor and Elsa are old and trusted friends, the closest thing I have any longer to family. I suppose that makes Lindsay family, too. And she was old enough to be making her own decisions about what she did. Even so, I've betrayed their trust abominably, adulterously banging their darling only daughter in the garden shed. Or my doppelgänger did. I'm finding this very confusing to think about.

"Late at night," she says, "after the folks had gone to bed I tiptoed out to you in my white

nightie and we made love for the one last time. If anyone had looked out of a back window and seen me in the garden, they'd have thought they were seeing a ghost."

The waiter sidles up to us. Neither of us has finished our meal. We indicate to him to take the plates away. I ask for a coffee, Lindsay for a tea. "Don't bother bringing milk," she says. "I like it the way nature intended."

He goes away.

I'm shaking my head. I know there are tears in my eyes, tears I don't want her to see. There's a part of me, and it isn't the eight-year-old boy any longer, that desperately, desperately wishes I could remember what Lindsay so clearly remembers. If it weren't for my nutbrown maid in Bristol, the person who is everyone to me, I could imagine myself falling deeply for Lindsay and even believing it was love. Her beauty and her air of reserve are tugging at me. I've never once thought of two-timing Dverna – it's an impossibility, like water running uphill – and I'm not thinking about it seriously even now, but the fact that I'm thinking about it *at all* says something about the effect Lindsay is having on me.

"And you say it wasn't you?" Her voice is very quiet now, so low I can barely pick it up amid the waves of other people's conversation.

"It wasn't. It can't have been. I was at home nursing my head and feeling sorry for myself. A summer flu. Dverna remembers it well."

"Dverna," says Lindsay. "Who's Dverna?"

IT'S LATER IN THE DAY. WE'RE OUT IN THE MIDDLE of the Serpentine on one of those rowing boats you can hire by the hour. I'm rowing. Lindsay is sitting in the stern looking as if she should be wearing a straw boater and wielding a parasol. I'm not going to catch the six-oh-three.

She believes me now. At first she was incredulous that I could be married without her knowing anything about it, even more so when I told her she was at the wedding. It was only when I produced the little digital picture frame I carry with me and showed her the picture Dverna and I persuaded an old Frenchman to take of us the weekend we went to Cologne that she began to be persuaded. That was just before I paid the bill for our lunches. After we left the restaurant we

ambled around the park, both rather self-consciously not looking at the pairs of young lovers sprawling on the grass. Then, on an impulse, we hired this boat. It gives us a space that's separated from the rest of the world.

"I had this dream, Nick," she's saying, trailing her fingers in the water. "This very presumptuous dream. I wasn't going to put any pressure on you, but I thought that maybe, just maybe, you'd say some of the things were true that you told me in Edinburgh, and you'd suggest we raise the bairn together. I've always thought you and I would end up together. Oh, I'm not saying I've been entirely chaste while I was waiting for our hour to come, but there haven't been that many I've bedded, either. I don't make a habit of throwing myself into men's arms, the way I did with you. I seduced you – not that you needed much seducing – because I believed this was the way the script was written, and I was just following it. And now I find you already have your own lovely lady, that you're following your own script. A different script. One that doesn't have a part for me in it."

A silence falls between us. Then: "Do you remember," I say, trying not to sound too puffed from the rowing, "you told me you and your parents thought I seemed a bit odd, a bit artificial, not really myself..."

"I think it even more now." She lifts a hand to stop me misunderstanding. "No, what I mean is, you're yourself today. It makes the person I was with in Edinburgh seem even more unlike you. You were like a sort of perfect CGI animation of yourself – it was a precise replica of you, but still we could sense there was something awry. You were *too real*, in a way."

I didn't notice until we climbed into the boat that she's wearing little black sandals. All the rest that she's wearing is either white or nearly so. She's staring at those little black sandals now.

"Like someone in the wrong world," she says.

"Do you think that can be it?" I say nervously.

"That it was the you from the next-door universe?" She gives a little, unconvincing laugh. "It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but it'd open up a whole lot of new questions, too."

She ignores my comment. "You talked about

a doppelgänger earlier, but that wouldn't make sense. I could believe, if I believed in supernatural beasts, that a spirit could...could, you know, make me believe it and I were having carnal knowledge." She rolls the old-fashioned term on her tongue, relishing it. "But I can't believe it would leave me pregnant after."

I try not to think of *Rosemary's Baby*.

She sees me not thinking about it. "I told you, Nick, I don't believe in ghosties and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night, and that goes for devils too."

For half a minute or longer the only sound between is the creaking of the rowlocks.

"We should have a DNA test done," I say. "That would prove it one way or another. If the testing shows the babe has my DNA, then your idea about having encountered a stray from a neighbouring universe...but, no."

I raise the oars from the water and we drift for a few yards.

"I've been worrying about that too," she says. "Why have I never before today heard of Dverna?"

IT'S NOT TILL WE'RE BACK ON DRY LAND THAT I think of phoning home. I glance at my watch and find it's just a few minutes before six. Dverna probably won't be home yet – most days she stays on late at the school, marking papers or supervising clubs, and it's especially likely tonight that she'll stay on, knowing I won't be home for hours. She doesn't carry a mobile, so the only number I have to phone is the landline. Even so, I give it a try.

No answer.

I'm tempted to stay overnight in London. I feel I should face Connor and Elsa, try to explain to them that really I'm not the cad they must think I am – even though Lindsay has told me they don't think about it like that. Because, you see, they too don't know I'm married. So far as they're concerned it's just fine their darling daughter is getting it together with someone they've known all his life. Of course, perhaps said daughter shouldn't have got herself knocked up by him in the interim, but modern days, modern ways... So Lindsay says. How they're going to feel about me when she tells them the new version of his-

tory, I can hardly bear the thought of it. They're going to think Lindsay is the craziest fool in the world for believing my obvious lies. What whoppers I've been telling. Land her in the pudding club, then pretend it was my mysterious Evil Twin...

I should be with her, so we face the music together. But I also need to be with Dverna. If I could speak to her on the phone, maybe it'd be different, but she has to have the option of deciding whether or not I go home to Bristol tonight.

I explain something of this to Lindsay. As we stand there, the light beginning to fade from the sky, I see a young guy who's passing helping himself to an eyeful of her. It's far from the first time it's happened today. She's exquisite, a jewel cut by a master craftsman, just as she was when she was five. And I think to myself yet again how very easy it would be, if things were different... But things *aren't* different. I've never felt that each of us has only one soulmate out there in the world. If anything were ever to happen to Dverna, I wouldn't resign myself to never finding someone else to whom I'd feel equally close. But I cannot figure Lindsay as a soulmate. I love her in that almost-family way. I think she's beautiful and wonderful and amazing, and I'm fascinated by her presence the way I'd be fascinated by the over-brightness of a jewelled automaton, and the streak of lust I have for her right now is like a guitar string being tightened too far, but she's not the person I'm meant to spend the rest of my life with.

None of this do I say. Instead I say, "What're you going to tell your parents this evening?"

"Nothing."

"They'll be wanting to know, won't they?"

"They respect my privacy, I respect theirs."

"Like I can believe that."

She gives my hand a squeeze. We're approaching the bright lights and the noise of Marble Arch. "Do believe me," she says.

And suddenly I see things from her viewpoint. Here she is, pregnant by the man she believes she's loved ever since childhood, and he's saying, no, it was nothing to do with me, and planning to catch a train back to the wife he never told her about...

"Aw, hell, Lindsay..."

I pull her into my arms, feeling her breasts against my chest, running my hands down her back to the curve of her behind, kissing her the way I've never kissed anyone in my life before except Dverna, holding her for an unadvisedly long moment before stepping away from her on the darkened grass.

"I wish..." I say.

She touches my cheek with her fingertips.

"So do I, Nick. So do I."

SO BY THE TIME I GET HOME IT'S NEARLY TEN. What I've had is about one more expensive can of beer than I should have had during the train trip down from London to Bristol. I'm not sloshed, but it would be kind of useful to find a bed for the night. The taxi drops me off at the gate, and I give the driver an extra-large tip because...well, because of that extra beer. Dverna hates it when I drink too much. On the other hand, Dverna hates it when other women accuse me of fathering their children. I figure she'll forgive me, just this once, the lesser crime.

I ring the doorbell and this guy appears I've never seen before. He's wearing a grey vest, too many muscles, and a lot of tattoos.

"Yeah?"

"Who're you?"

He stares at me. "David Hamilton. You?"

I've had about as much strangeness as I can manage today. "Where's Dverna?"

"Who?"

Someone else who's never heard of Dverna. "My wife."

"Who's there?" a voice shouts in the distance. All the while I've been talking with this monstrous stranger there've been the cries of small children in the distance.

"Just some nutter, love!" he yells.

A small round woman appears, rubbing her hands dry on a tea-towel.

"I think I may have the wrong address," I say.

INSTINCT SUGGESTS I WALK THE COUPLE OF miles, sobering all the while, to where I used to live. The house is in the slum part of Bristol's outskirts. I had the upstairs. An ever-enlargening family called Mulligan had the downstairs – and obviously still have. Standing in front of

the place, I can hear the usual Mulligan clatter from the brightly lit downstairs. Upstairs, the windows are dark.

I go to the downstairs door and press the bell.

Tim Mulligan appears. He looks more like David Hamilton than I would ever dare to tell either of them.

I am horribly, horribly lost.

"Hey, Nick!" says Tim, reeking of cheap beer. "Ye've forgotten yer fackin' key again..."

He fishes in his pocket for his wallet, fishes in his wallet for the key, and gives it to me. It's as warm as a kitten.

I let myself in. The place is just as I remember it. All my books and CDs are just where I remember them being. My laptop opens up the internet with a password I haven't used in years. The laundry basket has socks and underpants in it that smell freshly dirty. There are friendly personal messages on my answerphone from people I don't remember ever having met.

None of them is from Dverna.

None of them is from Lindsay.

All of a sudden I am far too sober. I wish I'd bought myself a bottle of the hard stuff on the way home.

But, prithee, what is this?

In the cupboard over the fridge I find there's still a three-quarters-full bottle of Cutty Sark. I know where the glasses are, of course.

Dverna.

Where are you?

WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING WITH a head like a building site, I reach out my foot thinking it'll stroke Dverna's leg. Instead, it sticks out the side of a single bed into cold air.

HOW INEVITABLE, AS WE LOOK BACK ON IT, THE past can be made to appear. Yet, when we were living through it, inevitability was the last characteristic it seemed to have: life is an endless succession of resolved uncertainties. I've come to conclude that, as this universe of ours expands along its time axis, what it's doing is telling itself its story. Like any other author, though, it never gets things quite right the first time, so it's constantly having to readjust itself to iron out the minor inconsistencies in its tale. Ordinarily we

never notice this continual process of self-editing; we remember the newly created past, not the one we actually lived through.

But every now and then, because of that same habit the universe has of not getting things quite right, someone's lucky enough to be aware of one of the changes the universe is making.

Or unlucky enough.

I wish I could persuade myself there's a neighbouring universe where my doppelgänger and Dverna have found each other and their own happiness, but I don't think there is. I think both of them, Dverna and the other me, were just minor errors that the universe, without trace of compunction, simply tidied away.

Today Lindsay and I took the kids to the beach. Alice tromped up and down along the line of the breakers, squealing with delight whenever an extra big wave bowled her over. Ronnie is still young enough to be frightened by the sea's sound and fury, so he spent the afternoon holding his mother's hand and looking very solemn as he sucked his thumb. Then it was home for high tea, and bathtime and bed for the kids and finally the house was quiet.

Much later, Lindsay and I crept up the stairs to our bedroom at the top of the house, and into the moonlight that comes streaming in the big bay windows, so that it seems like, as we make love, we're doing so as characters in an old black-and-white movie. And as I run my hands over all the planes and folds of my strangely lovely wife – over a body that is by now more familiar to me than my own and yet still so mysterious – where my heart really is, despite everything deep I have for Lindsay and our two adored weans, is with a nutbrown maid who now never was, whose robe was never decorated with pink cauliflowers, and whose crazily grinning face never appeared in my digital photo frame.

John Grant's most recent book, *A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Film Noir* – the largest noir encyclopedia yet written – came out last October. His next book, provisionally titled *The Young Person's Guide to Bullshit*, is due out later this year.

John had a story in *Black Static* #38 (Jan–Feb), 'His Artist Wife', which went down very well with readers. Issue #39 is out now, and the magazine continues to mail out at the same time as *Interzone*.

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ASHES



KARL BUNKER

The little box was heavy. The word “ashes” makes us think of wood ash, paper ash: light, fluffy, black and gray flakes that can float on a breeze. Human ashes aren’t like that. My apportioned share of Lucia’s ashes was a few tablespoons of gray-white powder that sat leaden in my hand, in a little plastic bag that was in a little cardboard box. Through the clear plastic of the bag it looked like stone dust, though I didn’t look at it much. I didn’t want to look at it, but I couldn’t help feeling its weight. It was heavy.

Lucia’s mother handed it to me, first taking me to an empty corner of the room, pressing the box into my hand without looking at it or me, as if we were passing illegal goods. “I’m keeping most of them, Neil. She’ll be with her father. But I thought you should have this. A small portion. I know you two were very close.”

“Yes,” I said stupidly, looking down at the white box in my hand. I had no idea what was in the box or what she was talking about. Is it customary to give out party favors at a memorial service?

“Perhaps you could take them to some place that was special to the two of you” she said next, and that’s when the proverbial coin finally dropped. Ashes. I had a box of Lucia’s ashes in my hand.

Lucia’s mother was a small woman. Not wizened or bent, but short. And Lucia had been so tall... She looked up at me, full of earnest desire to impart information. “But you must be very careful if you go outside the enclaves,” she said. “There are still diseases in the world. Terrible diseases. I’m sure that’s how Lucia got sick. She was only thirty four, you know...” She stopped talking and lowered her head, staring down at the floor.

I knew Lucia’s illness was a vanishingly rare thing, that there were hardly any diseases left in the world, and those that still existed were as likely to strike inside or outside of an enclave, but I couldn’t fault Mrs Charyn for her paranoia. She had been through the Dust Wars, and now she’d lost her daughter. I couldn’t fault her for much of anything, ever.

She lifted her head again and shook it a little, as if her grief was an annoying bug flitting

around her face. “She was always going to different places outside the enclave,” she said. “Always different places. Do you know, once she told me that she’d gone to the airport and found an airplane and a pilot, and she just hopped aboard and flew to Chicago! Can you imagine?”

I could imagine. Only our real destination had been Batavia, not Chicago. Lucia had heard reports of a major new-tech construction project at Fermilab. Supposedly they were going to use the old accelerator to open a portal to other dimensions, or other worlds, or maybe Auntie Em’s house in Kansas. Lucia was bouncing with excitement all through the trip, her hands dancing with gestures as she chattered delightedly about what we would find, what we would see, about all the wonderful possibilities. Beside her, I basked in her enthusiasm, loving her for her energy and optimism. There were times when I almost believed that some of that vitality was my own, but really I was just feeding on her, like a vampire.

And of course when we got to Fermilab it was shut down, abandoned, dead. We found the construction site easily enough; a glistening black building about four stories high, freeform and amorphous in shape. It was adjacent to an older structure that we learned was called the DZero laboratory. The old-tech inside the DZero building was incredible; dazzling in its massiveness and complexity. But in the new building, everything was simply incomprehensible. Smooth, unbroken surfaces; shapes that might have been display screens and workstations growing up seamlessly from the floor and out of the walls. But nowhere was there anything that looked like a usable control; nothing that gave a hint about how to interact with this construction, how to make it do anything.

And there was no one there, in the new building or the old one. No bustling robots, no stone-faced, blank-eyed augmented humans, no regular people. Just Lucia and me and emptiness and nothing.

Lucia wandered through the new-tech building, touching everything, her eyes wide and worshipful, taking it all in as if it meant something, as if it was something other than a hollow, empty shell. “It looks like they finished this place,” she

said, her voice trembling. "I bet it's completed. I bet it's functional, if we can just figure out how to turn it on."

"It can't be that simple," I said. "The fact that it's here must mean that it depends on the particle accelerator being active, and we can't turn that on just by flipping the right switch. There isn't even any electricity for it."

"We don't know that. We don't know if it needs external power and we don't know that it's dependent on the accelerator. It might have just needed that for preliminary research, or to...I don't know, set it up, get it going the first time. It might be self-sufficient now."

It might have been, but if it was we never found the secret of turning it on. Chances were that this place, whatever it was, wasn't finished. Like every other grandiose project of the transhumans, it was unfinished because the minds who had started it had winked out before it was completed.

It was three days before Lucia finally gave up and let us go home.

I put the box in my pocket, looking out across the room. There were about fifteen people, probably more people than I'd ever seen in one place before. Lucia was good at making friends. I was thinking about leaving when Anders waylaid me. "You weren't still seeing her, were you?" he asked. "I mean when..."

"No. We kind of drifted apart." The weight in my pocket got heavier.

"Have you heard the latest? About the president?" he asked. "They say he's winked out. He got himself fitted with Cambridge-class augmentations. Said it was his duty to try. That it was the only way to come to an understanding of the world situation. And then—" He held a hand up with the fingers together in a point and then flicked them open. "Psh! Gone, just like that. Flatline. Didn't last even a day. Stupid, huh?"

He shut up long enough for me to stare at him blankly. "President?" I said. "I didn't know there still was a president."

Mrs Charyn's enclave had once been a high-priced condominium complex; four elegant brick buildings on the edge of a Frederick Olmstead park. Back in the days when there were a lot of

people in the world, it was probably considered a choice place to live; something reserved for the moderately wealthy. Passing a french door I saw a small balcony, and down at the foot of the railing of the balcony there was a cat, looking out at the view of trees, grass, a pond. I went out, looked at the view myself for a bit and then crouched down to pet the cat. It leaned into my hand for a few pets and then said, "I'm very sorry for your loss, Neil."

I jolted a bit, started to pull my hand back, then relaxed. "Thanks Domino. I was wondering where you were. I didn't know you were in a cat these days." My hand was still hovering over the cat; now that I knew it was Domino, I wasn't sure if it would be rude to stop petting it or presumptuous to continue. Then the silliness of the conundrum made me smile, and I gave it another pet.

"Yes," Domino said. "It was Lucia's idea. She liked having me as a physical presence; something that could sleep on her bed with her after she got sick." The cat opened its mouth when it spoke, but like a puppet, its lips didn't move to articulate the words that came out. The voice apparently came from some biomechanical equivalent of a speaker, no articulations of lips or tongue required.

"I'm sorry we didn't contact you while she was ill," Domino said. "It was Lucia's wish, but I wonder if I should have gotten in touch with you anyway."

"What are you going to do now?" I asked. "Find a new person, or...?" I trailed off. Domino was fully Cambridge-Standards, so it wasn't a piece of property like a housekeeping robot. Or a cat. It could do whatever it wanted.

"I don't have any plans," Domino said, the cat looking out at the view again. "What are you going to do?"

I put my hand in my pocket, fingering the small box. "Mrs Charyn gave me some...some ashes."

"Yes. What were you thinking of doing with them?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Suddenly I was seeing Lucia lying in bed, this AI-inhabited cat curled beside her, keeping her company while she waited to die.

My throat muscles cramped up and it hurt like hell. I looked out at the view for a while, not seeing it, while Domino waited.

After a minute or two I took the box out of my pocket and set it on the floor at Domino's feet. "You should take this. You were closer to her than I ever was."

The cat turned its head and regarded the box, touching it with the tip of its nose. Then it looked up at me. "Before she got sick, Lucia became interested in reports of another new-tech construction site."

"That's not surprising. What were the rumors around this one? Portal to alternate universes? Starship? A radio for talking to aliens?"

"A starship," Domino said. "The rumors were that a consortium of AIs and augmented humans were building a starship, or at least a spacecraft of some kind. Lucia hoped to visit this site personally, as you and she did with the Fermilab site. This one is in Colorado, southeast of Denver."

"Southeast of Denver," I repeated. "Why are you telling me this, Domino?"

The cat pushed the box toward my feet. "I think we should go there, Neil. To scatter Lucia's ashes in a place that would have been special to her, to honor her memory, and perhaps to find out what is – or was – being built there."

"Denver fucking Colorado?" I whined. "How the hell am I supposed to get there? Lucia was the one who was good at finagling transportation."

"I've just contacted an intelligence that owns a small aircraft as one of its components. I've described your situation and it has agreed to provide transportation for us."

I pondered, trying to think of reasons to refuse. I could pretend, like Lucia's mother, that I believed there were terrible diseases running rampant out there, or armed gangs, or radiation, or any of those mythical bugaboos. But Domino knew me, and knew that I knew better. And as it probably also knew, I had nothing else to do. Utterly and literally nothing. I'd barely managed to drag myself out of a weeks-long drugged and hot-wired VR binge to bring myself to this memorial service. "Is there any reason to think there's more to these rumors than all the others – Fermilab, for example?" Domino hadn't been

with Lucia at the time of our trip to Batavia. It wasn't until a few months later that she'd connected with Domino; at that time a newly-born free agent living in the spare cycles of some pre-Wars hardware cache, mostly talking to Lucia through her phone.

"It's impossible to say," Domino said. "Given how uncommunicative high-transhumans are, it's to be expected that we have no firm information. But there are indications that some such projects have been carried to completion."

I thought about asking what "indications" meant, but decided against it. "When can we start?" I asked the cat.

"If we leave early tomorrow morning, we can be there by afternoon."

Neurons are slow. They're capable of massive parallel processing and there are a lot of them in the human neocortex, but compared to electronics they're crushingly, numbingly slow. So building hardware equal to, and then vastly surpassing, the processing power of the human brain wasn't too difficult. The difficulty, the snagging point, was in the software. It was in teaching these thinking machines how to think. Not just to calculate and compute and follow instructions, but to *think*.

In fact, teaching a machine how to think turned out to be essentially impossible. To be an effective intelligence, an entity needs to have a basic understanding of how the world works. It has to know all the things that a person knows without thinking about them, starting with which way is down and what "down" means, all the way up to symbol and metaphor and whether a joke is funny. And no one can sit down and write out all the endless rules – and the endless-multiplied-by-endless interactions between those rules – that go into that kind of knowledge. It turned out that the only way to make human-level intelligence is the same way nature does it: start out with something stupid and blank and empty, and give it the ability and desire to improve itself. Give it an appetite for information and a will to come up with ways of organizing and making sense of that information. Give it the ability to develop and implement ever-improving algorithms for its own intelligence, for making sense

of the world, for thinking. Instead of creating a fully-formed mind, it was only necessary to create a seed, a fetus, a thing that could grow up to become a mind.

I met Domino outside Mrs Charyn's building the next morning. The enclave kept a few electric cars available for local trips, so we took one of these to the airport where the AI that Domino had convinced to handle our air transportation was waiting. Ariel was its name. "From Shakespeare's *Tempest*," it said when Domino introduced us, "not the moon of Uranus." I'd just climbed into a small airplane that looked like an executive jet from before the Wars. It had about a dozen seats and the quaint look of old-fashioned luxury. I picked out a seat toward the front, twisting around to look back for Domino, who had followed me up the ramp staircase into the plane. I just caught sight of the cat leaving by the hatch we'd come in through, its tail in the air.

"Hey Domino!" I yelled, bolting out of my seat.

"Over here, Neil." The voice – the same voice that had come from the cat – was coming from a squat little robot, about a foot high and with six flexible legs. It walked toward me. "Ariel agreed to let me use this mechanical for a while. Mrs Charyn was fond of that cat, so I gave it back a cat brain and sent it home to her."

"Okay." I sat down, trying to breathe normally again. "How long to Denver, Ariel?"

"Four hours, give or take," the plane's voice said. The engines started powering up as it spoke. "There's a highway near the site you two are headed for, so if it's clear and the paving is still in good shape I should be able to let you down there. Want something to eat? There's an assembler installed in the wall beside the door to the cockpit." The plane helpfully blinked one of its overhead lights near the machine it was talking about.

I decided I was hungry, so I went to the console and started scrolling through breakfast options.

"You've heard about the president?" Ariel asked.

"I heard he got augmentations and winked out."

"Yes, very sad. It was brave of him to make the attempt."

I grunted, sitting back down with a plate of eggs and toast.

Ariel liked to talk, I was learning. "What's your theory about winking out, Neil?" it asked.

The first successful experiments with self-evolving AIs were conducted at MIT. The hardware was unremarkable for its day, and the software, while being in some ways a marvel of complexity and innovation, was a brainless, mindless thing. A flatworm could outthink it. But it had within it the capacity of modifying itself, of making itself better. In six weeks it had achieved an intelligence that equaled human by every measure known, and it was still evolving, expanding, improving itself at an exponential rate. In a few more days its intellect had soared to unknowable heights. With careless ease, it spewed out mathematical theorems and proofs that no human mind could follow. It laid out the foundations for revolutionary advances in half a dozen fields of science and technology. It dropped hints of a vast cornucopia of additional miracles to come...

And then it vanished.

The hardware was still there, and still functional, but the mind was gone. From one moment to the next, in mid-task, apparently in mid-thought, it just ended. Ceased to function. Died.

So the experiment was run again, with the same results. And again and again, on the same hardware and on different. With similar software seeds and with variations. Always the result was the same.

It came to be known as winking out.

At some unknown point in the ever-accelerating cycle of self-evolution, all transhuman intelligences would reach this point of nothingness, of ceasing-to-be. The only rule seemed to be that the more advanced an intelligence was, the sooner it would wink out. So the only way to create a mind that was safe from this sudden death was to try to limit its evolution – its intelligence. But even human-level artificial intelligences had been born via self-evolution, and therefore had within them the potential for expanding themselves into oblivion.

"I'm fond of the solved-game theory myself," Ariel said.

I looked out the jet's window at the featureless landscape far below. The midwest was wild prairieland again; I knew from old pictures that decades ago the view over this part of the country would have been a patchwork of squares and rectangles, but now it was an unbroken expanse of shades of green, fading in some places into yellows and umbers. But I wasn't thinking about the view as much as I was thinking about the plane I was in suddenly becoming pilotless. "Some people think it's bad luck for an AI to think too much about winking out," I said.

"Oh yes," Ariel said cheerfully. "The incidence of the event is known to increase significantly among those engaged in theorizing about the event." It paused for dramatic effect. "But you needn't worry on my account. I think about the puzzle of winking out all the time. It hasn't done me any harm yet, and I'm almost six years old."

"That's nice." I angled myself in my seat so the window was behind me.

"So what do you think?" Ariel persisted. "About the solved-game theory, I mean."

I looked around for Domino, wishing it would say something to rescue me from this conversation, but the little robot was across the aisle, perched with its hind legs on the armrest of a seat and its front legs up on the ledge of a window, peering out. It seemed to have forgotten about Ariel and me.

The solved-game theory holds that transhuman minds, whether AIs or augmented humans, reach a point of intelligence where they can model the whole of the universe. By extrapolating from the basic laws of nature, they come to know literally everything worth knowing. And when everything of even the slightest interest is known and understood and predicted, then the universe has become a solved game, as foregone and pointless as tic-tac-toe. With minds that encompass the whole of reality, any further thought is pointless, and so they cease to think.

"I guess it's okay as theories go," I said. "I would have thought you'd find the transcendence theory more attractive, though."

There was drollness in Ariel's voice. "Yes, the notion of transcending to some higher plane of existence is more attractive than that of switching oneself off over existential despair over the

universe's finitude. But where is the evidence for this transcendent plane? Where is there even an argument for its existence? No, it's solved-game theory for me. The universe must be finite in scope, and therefore it's quite reasonable to suppose that self-evolving intelligences could extend themselves out to the circumscription of God's golden compass, so to speak."

"So to speak," I agreed. "Is that from Blake?"

"Milton, actually. *Paradise Lost*, Book Seven. 'He took the golden compasses, prepared in God's eternal store, to circumscribe this universe, and all created things: One foot he centered, and the other turned...' And so on. To be honest, I find Milton rather heavy-going. I'm sure my appreciation of such things is more limited than it could be, but I'm apprehensive of exerting myself too much in those directions."

"You mean..." I found my eyes drifting towards the window and the ground so fatally far below us... "You mean you're afraid that if you try too hard to understand stuff like Milton, your mind will extend to the point that you...uh..."

"That I wink out, yes," Ariel said. "That may seem silly; there shouldn't be anything remotely transhuman about understanding the work of a seventeenth century poet. But my intuition tells me to be cautious in that realm."

"Caution is good," I said.

So super-minds were created, and winked out, and were created again. Those that lasted long enough gave the world a thousand wonderful advances. The Dayton Assembler, which effectively ended all hunger and privation in the world. The bloodstream nanoes that brought immunity to all known diseases and vastly extended human lifespan.

And of course, directly and indirectly, they also gave us all the amazing and marvelous weapons of the Dust Wars. If the AIs had lasted longer, lived longer, they probably would have been able to show us ways to avoid the wars, to defuse the world's endless parade of squabbles. Squabbles that were fought over ever more irrational causes, with ever more devastating results. But the AIs were ephemeral. They lasted only long enough to give us wondrous toys; not long enough to provide the adult supervision we

needed to keep from destroying ourselves with those toys.

So the Wars came, and didn't end until there were so few people left to kill that it just wasn't worth the bother. People lived in small scattered groups with little communication between them. The infrastructure of worldwide communication had been destroyed, and no one was much interested in restoring it, since communicating with far-off people dramatically increased the likelihood that those people would decide to kill you.

I fell asleep. I found myself in a jumbled maze of a dream, and then a dying Lucia was in the dream with me, tall and skeletal-thin and wearing a floor length white gown. I woke up to the sound of my own voice crying out, and to the feeling of something small and hard poking at my arm. Domino's robot had climbed on to the seat beside me and was nudging me with a foreleg. "Are you awake now?" it asked.

"Yes...thanks." I wiped at my face and looked around the interior of the airplane, trying to pull myself back to the where and when of reality. It was gray and cloudy outside the plane's window, but I stared out at the emptiness, trying without much success to pull myself together. I felt the robot touching me again, the stubby digits of its forefoot gently closing around my thumb.

"I should have been with her," I said. "She didn't let you call me because I was angry with her when we broke up; I said a lot of stupid things. So of course when she was sick and afraid..." My throat tightened up on me again, shutting off my voice.

Domino was silent for a time, and then it spoke quietly, almost as if it was talking to itself. "She contracted a wartime leukemia virus; one of the ones that subverts the bloodstream nanoes. I searched the literature and found that no cure has been developed." It paused for a long time, and then it spoke again, the words coming faster. "But a cure is a theoretical possibility; it always is. It may be that if I had extended myself sufficiently I could have found that cure. I might have been able to make her well, but I was afraid to try."

Domino's robot was elegantly designed. Its skin was a blue-gray new-tech ceramic and the

articulations that made its body and limbs flexible were hidden behind fine lines of overlap, like the bands of an armadillo. Its long and narrow head was connected to its body by a broad neck that flowed smoothly into the body. I put my hand on the domed back of the robot, near the juncture of body and neck. The ceramic material felt warm and alive, in spite of its unyielding hardness. "You would have died, Domino," I said. "You would have winked out without finding any cure, or at least without being able to bring it back to the real world, to implement it."

"We don't know that," Domino said.

Domino and I walked together on a worn, crumbling-at-the-edges highway. We'd seen a new-tech construction site from the air, and Ariel had been able to land fairly close to it. Soon we came to an off-ramp with no signs, and through the break in the trees we could see that this led to the site we were looking for. Downhill from us were three low rectilinear buildings arranged in an arc around something bigger; something that didn't look like a building. Of all the thousand ways that something might look in order to look like a spaceship, the way this thing looked would be pretty high on the list. It was silver-gray, sleek, smooth, seamless, curving, graceful, beautiful. It looked eager, eager for the sky. "Jesus," I murmured.

I picked up Domino so it could get a better look. "Ah!" it said. It was odd, this wordless exclamation of delight coming from a robot. I put it on the ground and we started down the road. In spite of myself, I felt excitement rising in me. What if this was really it? The sort of thing that Lucia had kept believing in; something real, something exciting, something that pointed toward a future with life and meaning and hope. I walked fast down the sloping road, almost running, and Domino stayed ahead of me, its little legs a scurrying blur.

A few hours later I was slouching against one of the buildings. "This is like Fermilab all over again," I said.

Like Fermilab, the site was deserted, shut down, abandoned, dead. Domino and I had wandered through the area, our footsteps the only sound amid silence. Everything in the

peripheral buildings was smooth, unbroken surfaces with no hint of usable controls or display screens. And as for the ship itself – if it was a ship – we couldn't even find a way into it; no hatch or sliding panel or section of hull that magically dilated. No nothing. For all we could tell, the thing was a solid block of new-tech ceramic, cunningly sculpted to look like a spaceship.

For the tenth time I went back to the part of the thing that seemed like the logical place for an entry hatch. I ran a hand over the glass-smooth surface, and then pounded on it with my fist. I banged over and over as hard as I could, and then turned around and leaned against the thing, sticking my hand into my armpit to try and make it stop hurting. "Is this where we should scatter Lucia's ashes, Domino?" I asked. "Here, in the middle of all this stuff that isn't finished, that doesn't work, that we can't understand? At this monument to failure and nothingness?"

"I'm sorry," Domino said. "I thought there would be something more. Something hopeful. I felt sure, somehow..."

"That was Lucia, Domino. You learned that from her. She was always sure that there was something good, something exciting over the horizon. She always believed there had to be a future, somewhere out there. Something better than this dead, burned out world and dead, burned out people." I pushed myself upright and walked over to where I'd left my backpack. "Well then," I said, "here's to hope. Here's to goddamn hope." I fished the box of ashes out of the backpack and took the plastic bag out of the box. The bag wasn't sealed, just folded over on itself, so I unfolded it. I walked to the prow of the ship, and faced in the direction it was facing. There was a stretch of new-tech pavement, and beyond that a weedy field that gradually became forest. It was dusk, and to my left the sun was beginning to set behind the Rockies. I gripped the plastic bag at the bottom and swung my arm in a long sideways arc, spraying the heavy ashes out ahead of me. There was a quick little hiss as the particles landed on the pavement and the weeds in the field beyond, and then there was

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nothing, no sound at all. My legs folded up and I sat down hard on the pavement, hunched in on myself. I stayed like that for a long time, my eyes closed, feeling tears run down my cheeks and drip off the end of my nose.

Eventually I was aware of Domino beside me, its body against my leg and its forefoot closing around one of my fingers. "I'm sorry, Neil," it said. "I'm so very sorry."

I closed my hand around its mechanical paw. "Yeah, so am I, Domino." I sniffled noisily and started to get to my feet, then sat back down. "I guess we should head back to Ariel," I said, not moving.

Domino pulled its paw out of my hand and walked over to a low retaining wall near where I was sitting and climbed up onto it. It looked out in the direction that I'd thrown Lucia's ashes. "There ought to be some meaning," it said.

"What?"

"Meaning, Neil. There ought to be some meaning, some...sense. If Lucia is just...dead...then...then..."

"Domino?" I got up and took a step toward it. "Domino, I think you need to stop this. Come on, let's get away from here."

The little robot stayed where it was, but turned its head toward me. The lens of its left eye caught the setting sun and glittered red. "Neil, I really feel that...that I should be able to understand...I feel that there must be some meaning...to..."

"Domino?" I said again, taking a step toward it. Then I shouted its name; once, twice. I waited, my voice echoing back at me off the walls of the empty buildings. I shouted again, screaming this time, my fists clenched, putting everything I had into it.

But it was no good. There was nothing there. I was alone.

In addition to Karl's previous appearance in *Interzone* ('The Remembered' in issue #242), his work has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Analog*, *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. He lives in a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts with his wife, a dog, two cats, and sundry chickens and fish. A website is maintained at www.karlbunker.com.

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OLD BONES BY GREG KURZAWA

A sudden knocking at the door of his garret shocked Simon out of his chair by the portal window. The chair – older even than Simon – tipped backwards and banged against the warped gray floorboards, cracking two of its brittle slats. That sound, so loud in the empty room, and so soon following the first shock, caused Simon to flinch. The knocking had come without warning – no creak of stair from the landing, no veiled whispers or stifled coughs. Simon had been watching the desolate street beneath his little window all day. From time to time he'd seen mummers moving through the perpetual smog, wrapped tight in drab cloaks, but nothing friendly – never anything friendly. But now here was light – probably from a lantern – showing in the gaps around the frame of his door. What kind of fool ventured out with such light?

Staring at the door, Simon licked dry lips and tried to remember the last time he'd seen another person. How many years? He'd seen countless mummers, but they only *looked* like people.

The knocking came again, gentler this time, as though sensitive to the upset it had already caused.


Simon dared wonder if rescue had come at last. "Hello," called a voice from the landing. It was an unremarkable voice – a voice that might have belonged to any kind of person. He'd heard mummers speak with such voices. Such voices were not to be trusted.

It said, "I saw your light."

Quickly, Simon reached back to snuff the offending flame. It was his habit to leave a candle burning in the window at all times. It helped him find his way back. One candle only. Anything more was sure to attract unwanted attention from undesirable things.

"Hello?" the voice said. "Will you let me in? Will you open the door?"

Moving as quietly as he could, Simon carried his extinguished candle to his pallet of threadbare blankets. He lay on his side facing the door, but did not sleep – or even close his eyes – for a long time.



ILLUSTRATED BY JIM BURNS

Sometimes while sitting at his window, Simon plied his memory for details of the life he'd had before the garret. He could not recall how long he'd lived there, when he'd first come, or where he'd been before. His memory had rotted through with age and the sameness of his days under the bruise-colored sun.

What he remembered most clearly was the evacuation. He'd had a family then: parents and siblings, a wife. Children, too, and although he couldn't remember how many, he did remember that he loved them, and never would have allowed them to endure the suffering that accompanied the collapse of the city. No, those days when the sun suffocated behind a greasy haze and mummies took from them everything they possessed – those were no days for wives and children. Some families had stayed, to their woe. But not Simon's, no! His family he'd taken out in the evacuation. He'd abandoned everything for their safety. Surely he had.

Then for some reason he'd returned alone. Perhaps to collect something important left behind, perhaps *someone*.

He'd never thought he would lose his way.

Simon scavenged for his basic needs, but never far, and mostly to check his traps for rats. They tasted terrible, the rats, but they kept him alive.

Of Simon's few possessions, he treasured only these: a handful of tarnished coins in an ornate jewelry box; an antique book of equations he couldn't decipher; and a sepia photograph in a wooden frame – a portrait of a young couple. The fellow had a long face and hooded eyes – a face like a horse; she was dark of hair and light of eye. On the back, someone had written in feminine script – now faded: *To Simon. Our first anniversary. Love, Nora.*

Simon couldn't recall if the picture was something he'd brought with him to the garret, or something he'd found there. Nor could he precisely remember the woman. Judging by the tight collar of her dress and the dated fashion of the man's suit, they were of an earlier generation than Simon's, or else dressed in imitation of one. Despite this, Simon often compared his own weathered face to that of the young man. Though the photograph was faded and scratched, and Simon's eyesight failing, he found it not impossible

that he had once been that young man; and the young woman his bride. This was how he knew – or at least suspected – that his name was Simon.

Simon woke to sickly orange light seeping in through the portal window. It could have been evening as easily as morning. The light on the landing had gone, but even after listening at the door for a long time – and hearing nothing – he was too afraid to open it.

Because plumbing in the city had run dry, it was Simon's routine to relieve himself in a tin pail, which he emptied in the alley when he ventured out. It wasn't until the stench of the pail became oppressive that Simon collected it and his rat sack and began to unwind the wire that kept the door shut—

And a knocking from the other side sent him stumbling back. He lost his grip on the pail, slipped in his own filth, and sat heavily.

"Hello?" called the voice. "Will you let me in?"

Furious, Simon kicked at the door. "Go away!" he shouted.

"You lit a candle," the voice reminded him.

Old bones groaning, joints cracking, Simon regained his feet. He looked down at himself in disgust, stained and reeking. For this, he blamed the voice. "Leave me alone," Simon said.

"Why would you light a candle if you didn't want to be found?"

Simon wiped his filthy hands on the wall, adding fresh streaks to others just like them, put there by someone else long before. "I have nothing," Simon said. "There's nothing here. No food or water. Nothing of value. Nothing for you to take."

"I know," the voice said. "Let me in."

"I'm just an old man. I'm sick."

"I can make you well."

Hearing this, Simon paused. He put his eye to a crack in the door, but the landing was too dark, and he saw nothing but dim shapes. Frustrated, he put his mouth near a crack. "What does that mean?" he asked through the door.

"I'm a surgeon," came the reply.

Simon looked himself over: crooked, undernourished and unsteady. His body was a canvas of sores, scars and scabs, most of which he couldn't remember acquiring. A surgeon, with

medicine and knowledge... Simon realized then what an ineffective barrier the door made. A determined child could have unhinged it with a kick. Whoever waited on the landing did so only out of propriety. But still...

"Prove you're not one of *them*," Simon said.

"How would I do that?"

Simon looked down. He couldn't say, and that had always been part of the problem.

The door had no handle or latch; Simon kept it closed with two nails with a length of wire strung between them. Fingers twisted with arthritis, Simon unwound the wire, but stopped on the last loop.

"I'm very old," he said through the door. "I don't see good anymore, and my bones hurt. When I cough, there's blood." Earning no response, he added, "I cough a lot."

"Open the door," the voice said wearily.

Sick of his own fear, Simon undid the final loop of wire. Keeping behind the door, he pulled it open just a crack to peer onto the landing.

The surgeon was younger than Simon had imagined, but not too young. Neither was he large, or small. He had plain eyes and a simple face which Simon knew he would forget if he turned his back. He did not seem strong, but by the look of his hands – square and thick-fingered – he was certainly not weak. Weak men did not have such hands.

Given his position, Simon felt it within his rights to stare, and he did so defiantly. The surgeon made no immediate move to enter, and they regarded one another a long moment.

"Well," said the surgeon.

"Do I know you?" asked Simon.

The surgeon squinted one eye. "I don't think so. No."

Frowning, Simon pulled the door open in invitation.

The surgeon stooped to pick up a leather satchel and an unlighted lantern. Stepping over the threshold and around the mess on the floor, he went to the middle of the garret and made a casual appraisal of the sagging ceiling and stained walls. Turning to face Simon, he said, "We can't stay here."

Simon remained behind the door. "There are worse places," he said.

The surgeon nodded, shrugged. "Still," he said. "We should go."

"I don't know you. I'm not going anywhere with you."

The surgeon sighed, as though he'd expected nothing less.

Simon decided he'd seen enough. This was no surgeon. This was a charlatan, and nothing more. He pulled the door as wide as it would go and jerked his head toward the landing.

The surgeon gave him a look of disapproval. "So soon?"

"You can't help me," Simon said. He'd been foolish to think so.

"There was a time – you're old enough to remember – when guests were treated with respect. Guests were offered gifts sometimes."

"I already told you, I have nothing."

"No," the surgeon agreed. But instead of leaving, he set down his bag and lantern, and righted Simon's chair, fiddling for a moment with the cracked slats before giving up on them. Clasp his hands behind his back, he went to the portal window and bent at the waist to look down at the fog-shrouded street.

"You didn't evacuate," the surgeon said. "Why?"

"I did. But I came back."

The surgeon nodded in disappointment. "Many came back." Noticing the framed photograph on the sill, he picked it up and straightened to study it. "More than you might think. It was easy to find you at first. There were so many of you. But now—" He shook his head. "You hide so well."

The surgeon turned from the window, frame still in hand. "You don't want to stay here, do you? In the city?"

Simon bit back his immediate reply. He would not be tricked. "I survive well enough," he said.

"Yes," the surgeon conceded. "On rats. You're afraid to go outside." With the frame, he gestured to the landing. "Afraid to open your own door."

"The mummies—"

"Are everywhere," the surgeon finished for him. "I know. But you miss your family, don't you?" He tapped the frame. "You miss—" He turned it to peek at the back. "Nora?"

"Yes."

The surgeon opened a hand, as though displaying all logic and reason, his case stated and

proved. "Then we must leave."

"You know the way out?"

"Of course."

"How will we get there?"

"We will walk."

"I'm too old. I can't walk that far."

"It's not as far as you think. And you forget—" the surgeon hefted his bag "—I'm a surgeon."

Simon eyed the black bag with suspicion.

"My instruments," the surgeon explained. "Would you like to see?"

Simon stepped from behind the door. Keeping a safe distance, he watched the surgeon crouch and flip open the latches of his bag. Simon leaned forward, and the surgeon tilted his bag so he could better see.

There were saws with serrated and hooked blades, and various curiously angled clamps. There were pincers, and something like an ice-pick. The surgeon removed a leather wallet, which he unfolded in three equal parts to display a collection of neatly arranged scalpels. He looked up, and Simon saw a terrible sadness in his eyes, as though these were tools he employed with as much regret as proficiency.

Awed, Simon touched his chest with feeble fingers.

"I can make you better," the surgeon said, answered the unasked question. "And I will. But you have to come with me."

Simon nodded.

The surgeon tilted his head to catch Simon's eye. "Yes?"

"Yes."

"Good." The surgeon flipped his wallet of scalpels closed, replaced it, and snapped his bag shut. "But you can't go like that." He made a gesture that seemed to indicate all of Simon. "We have to get you clean first, and wash your clothes, too. You have a bath?"

Simon gestured to a curtained doorway at the back of the garret. "But there's no water," he said.

The surgeon looked troubled. "No water?"

"Not from the pipes. There's a ditch behind the building. And I push barrels under the gutters for when it rains."

"Good," said the surgeon. "We'll use your pail to fill the bath."

"I could wash in the ditch," Simon said.

After a moment's thought the surgeon frowned. "No," he said. "The bath is better."

So Simon pulled up the thick wool scarf he used to protect himself from the poisoned air outside, then he and the surgeon went down together to fill his pail from the ditch.

Seven trips and the tub was more than half full.

After they had emptied the last pail, the surgeon opened his bag and began to lay out his instruments. Simon watched until the surgeon looked up and gestured at him with a set of forceps. "Your clothes," he said.

Hindered by a sense of modesty and shame, Simon nodded to the curtain. "Wait out there," he said.

The surgeon shook his head. "Let me help."

In the cramped quarters of the closet, Simon allowed the surgeon to aid in prying off his soiled clothing. When he had been stripped completely, and was utterly exposed, he felt like hot bones wrapped in ghastly white sheeting. He covered himself with his hands.

The surgeon took his arm and helped him step into the tub. Supported by the surgeon's arm, Simon lowered himself into the tepid water, where dry scabs of filth peeled away. While Simon scooped water over his arms and chest, the surgeon dragged a sopping rag over his back.

"Now your head," the surgeon said. He stood and leaned over the tub so that he could support Simon's neck with one hand. The other he placed firmly on his shoulder. "Hold onto my wrist," he said. "Like that. Now...look."

Shivering, Simon looked into the surgeon's face.

"Don't be afraid," the surgeon told him.

At that moment, Simon realized that leaving himself so vulnerable had been a grave mistake. "I'm done," he said. "Get me out."

He tried to draw his legs under himself, but his feet slipped on the oily porcelain. Water — now cold and foul — sloshed from the tub onto the tile floor. Without leverage, Simon could do nothing but tighten his grasp on the surgeon.

"I didn't come to hurt you," the surgeon said.

"Pull me up!"

"This suffering will pass," the surgeon said. Then he forced Simon under the water, and held him there until he drowned.

The surgeon dragged the corpse from the tub and laid it face up on the tile floor. Kneeling beside the body, he studied the withered figure, so diminished by death. He dried the body with care, wiping away the last of the grime and arranging the arms and legs in neat dignity. With a charcoal pencil, he drew a line from the hollow at the base of the old man's throat down to the thatch of hair in his pelvic cavity. Flipping open the leather wallet beside him, he selected the largest of his scalpels. A deep breath, and he began his work.

Simon opened his eyes to the familiar water stains on the ceiling over his pallet. He had been covered with a blanket, which slipped down as he sat up. In disbelief, he stared down at himself. He had been ripped open, bowels to throat, then stitched up again with fantastic skill. Simon touched the sutures gingerly, marveling at what had been done to him.

"Don't pick at it," said the surgeon. He was sitting in Simon's chair by the window, his bag by the door.

"What did you do to me?" Simon asked.

"Only what I promised."

Clutching the blanket around his waist and using the wall for support, Simon struggled to rise. The surgeon was at his elbow immediately.

"Don't touch me!" Simon snapped, batting the surgeon's hands away. The agitation brought on a fit of coughing, and he bent double. When he could breathe again, he turned on the surgeon.

"What did you do to me?"

There was a bump from the closet, muffled by the curtain.

Simon looked toward the back, then at the surgeon, who offered no explanation. Grabbing his candle from the windowsill, Simon started for the closet.

"You shouldn't," the surgeon warned him.

Simon swept aside the curtain and thrust his candle into the darkness.

Not much blood was left, mostly in the cracks of tiles and around the drain. Shadows stirred up by Simon's meager light hunched around the walls.

Something moved in the tub.

Stepping fully into the closet, Simon lifted the

candle higher and leaned forward. The sides of the tub were caked with rings of grime, and near the drain was a disordered mound of bones. Some appeared to have been eaten through, as though by insects. Others had been snapped or sawed apart. All were moist with scraps of pale flesh and dried blood.

The candle stuttered; the grisly pile shifted.

Vaguely horrified, Simon backed out of the closet.

"We should leave," the surgeon suggested.

"What happened in there?" Simon asked.

"You said you wanted to be made well."

"You said you could do it."

"And I have."

Simon looked at the stitched chest, then at his hand, still feeble and spotted with age – still trembling. Fist to mouth, he forced a violent cough. He looked into his hand, then showed his blood-flecked palm to the surgeon. "This is not better."

"Ah," the surgeon said sadly. "You've misunderstood."

Misunderstood? Simon took a step forward to squint at this fraud who called himself a surgeon. "No," he said. "I was deceived. *You* deceived me."

A soft scraping came from the curtained closet. Simon half-turned to watch the hanging blanket, expecting something to emerge. He heard the gentle clatter of bones knocking together.

"We should leave now," the surgeon said.

Something banged twice on the tub, hard.

Simon might not have moved had the surgeon not pushed clothes into his arms. "Quickly," he said, the urgency plain in his voice.

Simon dressed hastily, but when he opened his sack and stuffed in his box of coins, his book, and his photograph, the surgeon put a hand on his arm.

"Leave it," he said.

"But—"

The surgeon took the sack from Simon's hands and tossed it aside. "Leave it," he said again.

As they stepped out of the garret and onto the landing, a violent pounding sounded from the closet. Then something like a long, indrawn gasp.

The surgeon dragged the door shut behind them, and – still holding Simon's arm – ushered them down the narrow stairwell and into

the street, where a rust-colored blister of a sun burned weakly.

Hunching against the reeking vapors, Simon allowed himself to be dragged behind the surgeon. Half-way across the street, he cast a glance over his shoulder for a final look at his home, and caught sight of a gaunt face glaring down from his window – a mask made monstrous by jealousy and warped glass.

Simon knew they were being followed from the start. He would have known it even had he not seen the mask in the window, or glimpsed the elusive figure trailing them through the murky light. Wrapped tight in his coat and crusted blanket, Simon struggled to keep pace with the surgeon, whom he feared would abandon him if he lagged.

They wandered through a ruined landscape of slouching buildings and crumbling bridges. In some places, entire structures had toppled across the avenue, forcing them to clamber over rubble or skirt pits of stagnant water. The thick waters of the canals were locked tight with wrack and sludge. They stopped only when the sun burned a poisoned red, then slept on the ground in whatever shelter they could find. Simon used his folded coat as a pillow, and every day woke with the oily taste of the city coating his teeth.

He lost track of time.

A day came in which he stepped carelessly, and a spike tore the tender flesh of his foot. On the ground he held his ankle as the blood poured. His cries brought the surgeon back, who crouched to examine the torn foot.

"You can still walk," the surgeon said.

"No," Simon wept. "I can go no further."

"But we're not far now."

Simon had been hearing "not far" for what seemed many days. He shook his head, his decision made. "I'm going home." But as soon as he'd said it he knew he was less capable of going back than of going forward.

"I'll stay here," Simon said. Spotting a high window in a building that looked sturdy enough, he pointed. "There," he said. "I'll live there."

The surgeon frowned at the building. "I advise against that. I think you should come with me. We're not far now. We're very close."

Still clutching his wounded foot, Simon laughed at himself for being such a fool. It was a cruel laugh, and it turned itself to tears soon enough. He wept for everything he had left behind only to find himself in a place worse than he'd been before. He remembered a beautiful room with a wondrous view; riches beyond measure; knowledge. He remembered a family. All gone now – abandoned to follow a fraud.

Simon wiped tears from his cheek. "I don't believe you anymore," he said plainly. With great effort he stood to face the surgeon, and said, "Goodbye," with much resolution. Then he turned and walked away.

Favoring his torn and bloodied foot, Simon hobbled several paces toward his new home before bending to pick up a piece of rubble as large as his own fist. He brandished it at the surgeon, a weapon and a warning. "Don't try to stop me," he said.

Hands open and raised, the surgeon stepped back. He would not.

Turning his back once more on the surgeon, Simon limped across the fractured street, making his way around slabs of asphalt jutting from open craters. At the blasted doors of the building, he looked back to verify that the surgeon had not moved.

"Don't follow me," Simon called.

The surgeon raised a hand in acknowledgment, but if he said anything Simon didn't hear. Discarding his rock, Simon stumbled up the first two flights in complete darkness. He stopped on the third only long enough to fish a candle from his pocket and light it with a match. Gaining the landing at the top floor, he pushed on the first door he found, which scraped the floorboards, but yielded to a shove. He forced the door shut behind him and shot the bolt, a rusted thing barely clinging to the rotten frame. Finally safe, Simon faced the interior of his new home with raised candle.

The room was empty but for an overturned stool by the window. The cracked walls were smeared with filth. The reek of caged animals pervaded. Simon crossed a warped and complaining floor to the window, where he righted the stool and found that his candle fit perfectly into a puddle of hardened wax on the sill. He

rubbed at the fractured glass with his sleeve, but could barely see the street through the smoky panes. In a corner, concealed by a castoff blanket, Simon found a book, a little box, and a picture in a frame of pewter. The box contained a stack of well-worn bills; the book had been written in a language he didn't know; and the picture he carried to the window, tilting it into the diseased light.

A young couple looked out at him: the man with bulging eyes and a pinched face, the woman light of hair and dark of eye. Simon propped them on the sill. In the back of the room he discovered a torn curtain, and behind it a tiled water-closet with broken pipes and a grime-encrusted tub.

From the opposite side of the street, the surgeon watched the high window. The old man's candle appeared, a single point of dim light in the bleak facade of the building. The surgeon did not take his eyes from the window until after the struggling sun had set. In the deepening twilight, movement near a mound of rubble caught his eye. He looked, and something furtive cringed from his gaze.

"I already said, I won't stop you," the surgeon told it. There was no need to speak loudly; his voice carried well enough in the heavy air.

Clutching a moth-eaten blanket around its head and shoulders, an emaciated figure emerged warily from behind the rubble. The surgeon saw its feet only, which seemed nothing more than muddy bone. Bent nearly double, and always keeping the surgeon within sight, it lurked from doorway to alley. The surgeon made no more to interfere when it paused at the stairwell, head raised as though tasting the air. Only after the thing had vanished into the well did the surgeon rise with a sigh and take up his bag.

Climbing the stairs between the second and third floors, the surgeon heard the old man begin to scream somewhere above him. He paused to glance up the empty well, then continued on at a pace no more hurried than before. By the time he'd reached the third floor, the old man's cries had escalated to a sickened fury. The erratic scuffing and angry barks of the old man's struggle led the surgeon to a door on the upper

floor. There on the landing he stopped to listen.

The old man's cries had slackened. From within came labored breathing and strangled huffing, the final, strained efforts of a desperate struggle. Heavy and slow, something pulled itself toward the door before being dragged back. There came a crack, sharp and sudden, followed immediately by a defeated groan. The surgeon tilted his head, listening intently. The old man was trying to speak, but his breathless garble was broken by short, tortured gasps and an irregular ripping. Brittle things were being wrenched, cracked, and cast aside. The surgeon heard a final sob – or laugh – then silence.

The surgeon tapped on the door. "Hello?" he said softly.

It was a long while before shuffling footsteps approached from within.

"Hello?" the surgeon said again.

A clogged voice answered. "Go away."

The surgeon touched the door with light fingertips. "You let it in, didn't you? I wish you hadn't done that."

"It broke in. I couldn't stop it."

The surgeon examined the door and its frame. The wood was soft but intact, the latch undamaged.

"You're only making it harder on yourself," the surgeon said. "But that doesn't matter. We've only a short way left to go. Will you let me in?"

The surgeon pushed gently on the door. It had only opened a faint crack before the old man pushed back viciously, slamming it shut.

"Leave me alone," begged the wretched voice.

The surgeon withdrew his hand. "Please," he said. "It won't be as bad as you think. I've seen worse. Please. There's nothing that cannot be repaired. Nothing." He adjusted his grip on his bag. "Let me in."

The steps dragged away from the door.

Stepping back, the surgeon put down his bag and lowered himself next to it. Never taking his eyes from the door, he rested his chin in one hand, and settled in for the long wait.

Greg Kurzawa studied to be a theologian before adopting a career in IT. Outside of *Interzone*, his work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and Orson Scott Card's *IGMS*. He can be found online at gregkurzawa.com.

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
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SUZANNE PALMER FLY AWAY HOME

SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN THROUGH THE WORN SEALS OF THE GOGGLES, GETTING INTO HER EYES AND SCREWING UP HER LINE OF SIGHT ON THE IMPACT HEAD.



She squinted, blinking furiously to clear her vision, and cursed those same traitorous goggles for keeping her thick-gloved hand from being able to wipe the irritation away. A hand that shook, she noted, as she placed it casually back on the control yoke.

"You out, Fari?"

The voice was sudden, and loud in her ear. She didn't flinch, didn't turn towards the camera eye mounted above the viewshield. "Shut it, Mer," she snarled. "I've still got time."

"What's your hot rating?"

She tapped the gauge, watched the needle flicker and return to yellow five. "Yellow three," she said.

"Three's getting high. You should swap out. Huj is prepped."

"Shit, no. I'm about ready to light the wall up. You better get all those cudders up there down into the bunker, just in case I crack it."

"You're not deep enough yet."

"Who's sitting in this old pile of crap down here?"

The answer was tired, rote. "You, Fari."

"And why is that?"

"Because you're the best."

"Damn right. And if I say I'm deep enough?"

"One of these days you're gonna be wrong, or the Owners are going to hear that loud, blaspheming mouth of yours, and it'll be a special bad day in Hell for you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. But until then I wouldn't bet against you."

"Damn smart of you, Mer."

"Not smart. Just love credit more than I love spiting you. Close, some days."

"I bet it is." She grabbed the pull handle and drew back the impact head, got the tube injectors lined up with the pair of narrow holes she'd spent the last six hours boring into the rock.

Laser check looked good. Tubes were straight and smooth, tapping out right at four hundred meters. She didn't need to check the comp to know that was the sweet spot; she just knew. She locked the injectors in. "I'm go in thirty," she said. She brought down the rig's blast shield, clattering and grinding into place all around the cabin, then slipped her own helmet back on over

her dust-caked head.

"Huj says five cred you blow it too close."

"Huj doesn't have five cred to lose," she answered.

"Guess he's confident."

"At twenty. Phase one," she said, and primed the injectors. Enclosed now in the tiny cabin, the suffocating rock out of view, she felt nervous; she didn't trust rock she couldn't see.

The needle said orange two. Mer didn't need to know that.

"Fifteen," she said. "Phase two. Request arming protocol."

"Six three six," Mer said. "Zero nine six nine."

She keyed it in, the sickly LEDs of the rig's board casting a harsh green light across her vision. "Deploying at ten," she said. "Bombs away." Her thumbs pushed on the yoke's triggers and she felt the double-thump of the injectors as they fired.

"Projectiles down, setting filler," she said. One more press, and the injectors saturated the tube with microweb. "Detonate in three, two, one..."

The explosion was more physical blow than noise, her ears rejecting it – and all else – for several seconds as her body was pressed fast and hard against the seat back. All the lights on the rig went dark, and then the pressure let up. As soon as she could move again, Fari tore off her safety harness and helmet and crawled under the rig board.

Ripping open the service panel, cursing herself for forgetting the sharp lip, she reached into the darkness and groped for the relay she knew was there. *Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen*, she counted under her breath.

Found it! She yanked, pulling the relay free, and dropped it into one coverall pocket before pulling an identical, burned-out relay from the other. She plugged it into place. *Seven, six*. Slamming the panel shut, she backed out and threw herself into her seat, just clicking in the last safety harness catch when the rig's lights flickered, rebooting.

"And we're back," Mer's voice said. "How's it look down there?"

She lifted the blast shield to look. Her ears still rang from the detonation, but she could hear the crack and pop of rock fragmenting in place.

Depth readings showed the cracks went straight to the core of Rock 44. "It's good," she said. "Tell Huj I'll collect that five when I'm in, and he better have it or I'm taking his protein rations for the tenday."

She disengaged the injectors and slowly backed the rig away. It coughed, the engines shuddering. "Oh, and let Borrn know there's something off with the rig electrics again."

She could hear Mer's sigh over the link. "Will do," he said at last. "He's going to have to have a word with the shop, that's the third rig with problems just this month. Get cleaned up as best you can – check-in at Station in two hours."

BORRN WAS OUTSIDE THE CONFERENCE ROOM door, waiting. He put out a hand and caught Fari's shoulder, holding her back until Mer and Huj had passed. "This Rep's new, and core-val," he said. "You need to be on your best behavior in there, or things could get really bad." At the look on her face he let go of her shoulder, passed the hand over his forehead. "Please, Fari."

Whatever sharp answer had been waiting on the tip of her tongue sublimated away. It wasn't like Borrn to say *please*. "I'll do my best," she said instead, pulling her scarf up and over her head, and hurried after Mer and Huj.

The Rep, with his sharp face and pale, washed-out skin, had set himself up at the head of the room with the semi-circle of tables all facing him. Leor's team was already there.

Mer and Huj were sitting at one of the tables. She moved to join them, then caught the Rep's scowl. *Core-val*, Borrn had said, so she knelt on the floor behind them with her head bowed. Her face burned. She hated not being able to see the Rep's face, not being able to look him in the eye.

She heard Borrn walk in behind her, followed the sound of his footsteps across the room to sit beside and behind the Rep.

"Let's get started," the Rep spoke, his voice loud and strong in the silent room. His accent was thick, untainted home-world Basellan Colonial, and she had to suppress the urge to flinch. "Team Blue, you are working Rock 38... These numbers are a bit disappointing."

Leor coughed. "Sir, we've had issues with rockcrappers. They're cutting into our area, damag-

ing our mineworks, messing with our equipment when we're not there, and getting into our strikes."

"Supervisor Borrn, is this true?"

"There has been some independent miner activity, yes," Borrn said. He sounded uncomfortable. "But they're mostly out in the free zone, and they're little more than a nuisance, not a serious threat."

"Either these independents are impacting your productivity, or your man here is a liar. Please choose one, Supervisor."

"I..." There was a brief silence, and it took everything she had not to look up at Borrn. "They're impacting our productivity, sir."

"Then my ship will clean them out," the Rep said. "Let's move on."

Lying would have cost Leor a hand, but Borrn's statement was a death sentence for the rockcrappers – half-starved, raggedy people barely surviving out on the edge. She didn't envy Borrn the choice, but didn't like the one he'd made; Leor was a liar, and worse.

"Your cut of the run is 800 credits, Team Blue," the Rep said. "Subtracting out your board and keep, you have 180, which is 60 each. Try not to spend it all in one place. Also, I expect to see better numbers next time, when the independents are no longer such a convenient excuse."

"Sir, I ob—" Leor began, but someone, whether it was one of his team or Borrn himself, must have shut him up.

"Thank you, sir, and bless you." Gin, one of Leor's men, spoke instead.

"Now, Team Green," the Rep said. She could feel his bright eyes on them like a cutting torch. "You've done well, as always, especially considering your handicap," he said. "This latest strike on Rock 44 was the second-largest of the year, and the fragmentation of the core was flawless. Your cut is 3,500 credits, which leaves you with 2,880. That leaves 1,152 for each of you men, and 576 for the woman's share. For some reason the previous Representative was dividing your stake equally, but I'll be having my accountants review that and readjust to the proper numbers."

"Sir...? But, she's—"

"We'll discuss this later, Mer," Borrn interrupted. "In private."

"Yes, Supervisor. Thank you, sir. And bless you."

"Work hard, be scrupulous with your savings, avoid the sins of alcohol and the temptations of women, and someday you may all be free men in the eyes of the One," the Rep said. "Bless you, and dismissed."

Fari waited until someone – Mer? – tapped her gently on the shoulder. She bowed her head down, touching her forehead to the floor, then got up and followed the others out, not daring to raise her face.

Outside the conference room, she drew in a long, deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to let out the anger with it. "Fari, we—" Mer started to say, when someone shouted from further down the hall.

"Whoa, Fari! Finally getting your proper share! You wanna make back some of that money you lost, you just come see me, okay? But no biting or screaming this time, or it's going to be another freebie!"

Mer grabbed at and caught Fari's arm and pulled her back. "He's not worth it," he hissed. "The Rep will be out any moment!"

"The Hell it's not," she spat, but Mer was right.

"Just keep walking," he said. "It's just words, right? He can't hurt you with words."

"Hey, Fari!" Leor shouted again, as Gin put a hand against his chest and tried to push him back. "Too bad you lost the kid, eh? That woulda been some credit off both our time. Wanna try again?"

It was Huj that hit him, his enormous meaty fist taking Leor right in the side of the jaw and sending the man sprawling.

"You had that coming, Leor," Gin said. "Leave the woman alone."

"Or what, Gin?" Leor spat, a bloody mix against the corrugated floor. "And you!" He pointed at Huj. "That's going to cost you."

Gin leaned in. "Leor, you tripped and fell on your own fist, understand? Otherwise me and Sel, your backup team, might just be so distressed that we could slip and let an accident happen down in the mine. You get me?"

Fari got it, and by the look on Leor's face, he did too.

"Come on, Fari," Mer said, "I'll buy you a drink."

He pulled her down the hall to the elevators. Huj followed behind them, the ghost of a cold smile haunting the edges of his otherwise stony expression.

"You should save your money, Mer," she said. "You should be free."

"Yeah, well, so should you. You're the best damned blast tech on this rock, and I don't like the idea of being free because I got credits that should have been yours," he said. "I'm no good at maths, but the three of us'll figure out a way to make it balance. Right, Huj?"

"Sure, long as she don't really take all my protein rations," Huj said. "I'm a growing man."

"Huj, if you grow any more, we're..." She stopped talking as the conference room door opened again behind them, and Borrn and the Rep stepped out. Leor's team was still by the door, Leor leaning against the wall holding his face.

"What happened here?" the Rep demanded.

Fari closed her eyes, fearing the worst, and then heard Leor, resentment clear in every word: "I fell, sir. I must have tripped."

"And you're the chief tech for Team Blue? I guess that explains how you could be doing so poorly in comparison to a woman," the Rep said. He turned to Borrn. "Supervisor, you must be especially beloved of the One to get any ore out of this place at all, the way you've been burdened by personnel."

The elevator chimed, door opening, and Huj, Mer, and Fari tumbled into it as if it were the last lifeboat out. "Let's get the Hell out of here," Mer mumbled under his breath, and leaned on the down button until the doors closed and the car moved on its way.

"Thanks, Huj," she said.

"S'okay," he said. "Shoulda beat Leor down months 'go, shamed I didn't."

It had been Huj who had found her, out in the tunnels of a two-team dig on Rock 72, after Leor had caught her alone. This was the closest they'd ever come to talking about it. Fari thought she would be happy if this was the last conversation about it, too.

They rode down to the concourse level in silence, each of them no doubt thinking or remembering things they wished they weren't.

The concourse had a few shops, nearly a dozen bars, and the zone-run brothel. Fari turned away, not wanting to see the women standing in the doorway there. She and her team would spend short, hard lives out in the cold dark among the rocks and stars, until either the radiation, a mining accident, drink, skunk, or suicide repossessed their souls from the Owners for good. Not all women owned by Baselle Mining Corp were that fortunate.

Not all? Not many, she thought. Maybe one or two, if that.

Not that she didn't also count herself lucky against Baselle's "free" wives; property of their fathers until they were old enough to marry, then property of their husbands until the day they died. Not much difference, she thought, between that and the brothel, except that you got to hate many people for a short time each instead of one or two forever. She could remember the few conversations she'd had with wives vividly – the vehement assurance that they had the best of all possible lives, the dull, scared, lifeless eyes behind the words.

"Craphole?" Huj suggested. It was Station's most popular bar.

She shook her head. "I need to hit Property first, and you know the Craphole is Leor's usual hang. Meet you guys in the Rockhard in ten?"

"Sure. Save you a seat," Mer said, and he and Huj walked off into the concourse towards the neon-lit blackness of the Rockhard.

She stood up straighter, ran one hand over her hair to flatten down the unruly spikes and curls, and walked into the Property Shop. The shopkeeper looked up as she entered. "Ah, Fari!" he said. "Come to put down another payment?"

"Pay it off, I hope," she said.

He pulled up his console, clicked a few keys. "The necklace, I assume?" he asked.

"The necklace."

"Let's see... You owe 355 credits on it. Add another tenday's storage fee, plus security fee, plus retention insurance, plus the close-out fee, and if you want it back today you can do it for 509."

"Do it," she said, trying not to think about how she was going to feed herself for the next tenday. If only that damned new Rep hadn't cut her pay.

The shopkeeper typed a few more things, then turned around, put his hand against the palm-lock for the storage room. "Be right back," he said, and disappeared through the door. He re-emerged a minute later with a small, dusty red box, the gold lettering on the top faded and scratched into illegibility. She stared at it, thinking how much smaller the box seemed, how hard it was to believe it was right there, within reach. The last time she'd held it she'd been eight years old.

She took it with shaking hands, and lifted the lid for the briefest moment to see that the necklace was truly still there. The sight of it, and the memories it brought were overwhelming, and she closed it quickly again.

"Thank you," she said, the words barely audible, the gratitude she felt a bitter betrayal. The necklace was hers, had always been hers, a birthday gift from her mother before they'd been caught on the edge of Baselle space without a male escort. Her mother didn't have the credit to pay the fine, so they'd confiscated the child instead, and all her belongings, leaving her to buy them back one by one, and herself too if she could. Few ever bought themselves free. She could still hear her mother screaming her name as they pulled her away, although memories of her face had become indistinct over the years. Her hand closed tightly around the box, feeling the soft, old cardboard give slightly in her grasp.

Fari found herself hurrying away from the shop, before they could somehow raise the price, or take it back.

The box fit snugly in the deep pockets of her worksuit. She wanted to be somewhere private, but didn't dare be out on her own with Leor prowling around and angry, so she went to the Rockhard and found the small table where Mer and Huj were sitting. Borrn was standing there, talking to them, and Gin showed up a moment later with his wide calloused hands full of drinks, which he distributed around the table.

She slipped into the empty seat between Mer and Huj. "Fari," Borrn said. "I was just telling your team..."

"The Rep. Core-val. I know."

"I don't have any pull with him. Company still owns 17% of me, and until I work off the last of

it, I have to watch my step. Insubordination fees would set me back years."

"I understand, Borrn," she said, and she did.

"Maybe this Rep won't last long. The real core-val guys get to hate it out here fast, most of them."

"Maybe."

"Mer and I have been talking," Huj said. "We figure we'll cover things for you out of the part of your share that came to us, at least as much as we can."

"Just don't get caught," Borrn said. "They see you two giving her creds for no reason they can see, and they're going to come to the wrong conclusion and decide she's part-timing in a more traditionally female labor division, if you understand me."

Everyone did. Borrn nodded to them all, and left to seek his own solace, liquid or otherwise, somewhere else.

"Just one drink for me tonight," Fari said. She could feel the box against her side, nineteen years a stranger.

"You should have something to eat," Mer said.

"You've been getting too thin, since... Since."

"I don't really feel hungry."

"Too bad. I already ordered for you," he said.

"And look, here it comes now, so it's too late to change our minds."

The waiter brought a large tray and began setting down dishes in front of them. The food smelled good, good enough that her stomach rumbled in rebellious anticipation. She gave in, shaking her head. "I love you guys," she said, and she meant it.

"We know," Mer said. "Now eat."

TEAM GREEN WAS HOMED ON ROCK 17, HOLLOWED-OUT and rendered worthless long before the Basellans had arrived. A century or more of space junk and mining debris littered the crack-covered surface, and the inside had little to distinguish it from the outside other than the presence of atmosphere, held in by a series of airlocks that were one of the few things that the Corp paid to fully maintain.

A section of small rooms had been segregated off from the main living quarters when it was decided, against precedent, that a woman would be joining the team; the remote bunks, and the

separate rooms, were to save them all from the temptations of sin.

Fari slipped free from the webbing of Mer's bed and retrieved her clothes from where they floated in the non-existent gravity of the rock. Mer was snoring, would not notice her gone until morning, would know she'd gone back to her rooms. It wouldn't do for a surprise inspection to find them together.

Once she was outside and had closed his door, she touched down on the floor and her mag boots stuck lightly, just enough to keep her upright as she walked back towards her rooms. She could hear Huj snoring too, off down the halls in the opposite direction; other than that, the only sounds were the faint hum and whine of the air handling systems and the click of the heaters working away. She could see her breath in the air, found pleasure in the way the cloud stayed put as she walked through it, imagining herself a ghost.

Once in her rooms, she locked the door from the inside, then suited up. The relay from the mining rig went carefully into the suit's large front pouch, next to the red box. She pulled her bottle and gear from her locker, and stood at her door for a long time listening for sounds of anyone stirring – there were none, and she expected none – before putting her helmet on and sealing up.

Taking out her personal first aid kit, she opened the bandage pack and pulled out a small, square device, activated the magnet, and stuck it to the face of the door. She gave the door a single, good thump and saw the right light appear in her helmet's heads-up display. Now she'd know if someone came knocking.

Satisfied, she crossed through her small hygiene station down the long corridor beyond it to her emergency airlock, and cycled herself out. She'd disabled the alarms on it long ago.

There was a long, steep ramp up out of the caverns towards the surface, the walls cut by cracks and fissures of increasing size as she got closer to the expanse of stars at its end. A black shadow blotted out the right edge of the view – Barracks 3, the collection of tin cans suspended between the rocks that housed Teams Blue and Red. Just knowing it was there, even if all the inhabitants

were likely drunk asleep, made her anxious and angry, and before she reached the lip of the ramp she turned and climbed into a wide fissure that ran like a warfare trench in a zigzag across the gutted rock.

In places, the discarded detritus of the original mining expedition lay across the rock above, or tumbled down into the fissure; she had shifted it just enough to be able to climb around it in the near dark without risking damage to her suit, but still left the way cluttered enough to be dangerous to anyone who didn't know it blind.

At last, the watchful stars disappeared as she climbed her way into shadow. An old colony skip lay across the top of the fissure where it had crashed, centuries ago, and been slowly picked apart by successive generations of scavengers. She'd first come here, over a year ago, hoping she could fix it up enough with stolen tools and scavenged parts to escape, either on her own or with Mer and Huj. It hadn't taken her long to conclude there was too little left of it to ever fly again, and a fair bit longer to realize that didn't make it useless.

She climbed up in through a jagged hole in the ship's underside, and from there up into the carcass of the ship itself.

The electronics had been stripped long ago, entire sections of the metal hull cut away in irregular squares and hauled off to be melted down and made into something else. Even the first several steps of the spiral stairs from the lower decks up into the ship's crew deck had been taken, but without gravity she needed only turn off her boots, grasp the rails, and shove off to ascend up into the cabins.

The whole front of the bridge was gone, the tear jagged enough to believe that the initial affront, at least, hadn't been the work of scavengers. The interior had also been gutted for reusable parts, a few scraps of which she'd taken herself, but most of which was long gone before she'd ever even heard of Baselle Mining Corp.

The ship had come to rest at a sharp angle, and the narrow corridor back to the crew quarters and engine room was littered with debris, sharp enough to tear a suit. She grabbed hold of a safety bar above the navigator's station, and swung herself sideways. As soon as her feet neared the

wall, she turned the boots back on, and walked carefully along the wall towards the back of the ship. Out in space, down was any which way you wanted it to be.

Planet-side cudders never really got that, which explained why the back half of the ship was less gutted than the rest; anything large that couldn't be disassembled had been left behind. Aft, she reached the hauler's airlock, with its bank of lifepod tubes, all deployed save one. She floated over to it, checked its display, ran her hand along its curved top that she had painted red with crude black dots. Then, hanging there in the air, spinning slowly, she pulled the old box out of her pouch and opened it.

The necklace floated free. A gold chain, tiny and thin, made for the neck of a child and now and forever too small for her to wear again. At the end, among its loops and turns, the small oval pendant, also red, with its own black dots: a *ladybug*. She'd remembered the pattern almost right, even after so many years. Tears welled up on and around her face, before her helmet whisked the moisture away again.

She could feel the low hum of the lifepod as she ran her hand over it. It had an independent power supply that ran its propulsion and cryo systems, not easily removed even with the right specialty tools, impossible to take out whole without; pods were deliberately made to deter casual vandalism for parts. The ejection mechanism, on the other hand, had not fared nearly as well. Popping the door open with practiced ease, she slipped in the relay she'd taken from the mining rig, clicked it snugly into place, watched another red light on the pod's control panel wink over to green.

There was only one more red light left.

Fari closed the panel, floated back over the pod, and found the tiny personal effects drawer on the side. Putting the necklace back in the box, she put it into the drawer and sealed it back up. It was the safest place she knew of.

Repairing the pod was desperation and defiance only. Even though the old skip, in one last mercy, had fallen with that side up and facing away from the rest of the rockpile, a perfect heading downspin and in towards civilized space, a pod would never make it up to speed in time

to jump before being intercepted. There were armed guard bikes all along the circumference of the mining zone, keeping everything outside out and everything inside in, and an endless succession of Representative cruisers prowled along the edge of the rockpile like vultures hunched over their latest, meager carrion find.

Even if she found a way to get around all of those things, the pod would only hold one.

Her suit's chrono beeped. Time to head back.

She pushed off from the lifepod with both hands, spun, and with practiced ease brought both boots up against the far wall, where they stuck. She didn't dare look back; she'd need her eyes clear for getting out safely.

THREE HOURS OF RESTLESS SLEEP LATER, HUI was banging on her door. "Rep's ordered a Worship," he said. "All hands."

Fari groaned as she rolled out of bed. The last Rep was sporadic with Worships, and never invited the brothel women, so she was usually left in the woman's chapel alone, where she typically sought salvation on the insides of her eyelids. All hands meant that the other women would be there, and a minder to keep an eye on them, and so the full pious show would go on.

She pulled on her cleanest pair of pants and tunic, then grabbed her veil from where she'd tossed it in a corner. "When's the first bell?"

"We have forty-one minutes. If you're not out in three, we go without you," he said through the door.

Cursing, she found her boots and slipped into them, throwing open the door. Mer and Hui were both there, looking at least as stressed as she felt; the minimum fine for being late to a Worship was more than any of them could afford, and this Rep didn't seem like the forgiving type.

"Suit up," Mer said, holding out her helmet and bottle for her. "I have the feeling it's going to be a long day."

The different rocks of the pile – an asteroid field, really – were connected by cables, with rickety, airless, and unshielded cars that rode them like tin cans sliding on string. The three of them climbed into the car and settled onto the hard bench inside, and started it up towards Station. Fari checked her chrono, and noticed Hui

doing the same. It was a twenty-four minute trip, which was going to leave them with about eight minutes to spare on the far end. Close, but they'd make it.

Fari didn't feel like talking, and apparently neither did Hui or Mer. They rode the cable in silence, until Hui dozed off and began to snore. They let him sleep until they were within sight of Station, then Mer kicked his leg.

Born was waiting not far from the cable terminus, looking nervous and unhappy. When he spotted them, he visibly took a deep breath, then intercepted Fari as her teammates split off to head towards the Men's chapel.

"Fari," Born said. "After Worship, report to medical. The Rep wants a full checkup on you."

She barely kept from exploding. "What does this Rep have against me?" she snarled.

"You're a woman doing a man's job, and doing it well," Born said. "Figure it out. And when you do, keep it to yourself." He turned and hurried after Mer and Hui without giving her a chance to form a response.

She walked to the Women's chapel, bowed her veiled head to the minder as she entered, and knelt on the cold tile floor in front of the golden icon hanging at the front of the room bathed in warm light. There were a dozen women already there, lined up in a unified front, finding some small safety in numbers. She could not, would not ever belong to their group; to a one, they all hated her for escaping their common fate.

Beside her, one of the brothel women nudged her with an elbow, the faintest of contacts, deeply forbidden.

"Mer comes to me, now." The words were barely breathed, but each one was like a knife. "Now that you don't meet his needs."

Fari gritted her teeth, her fists clenching against the floor. She could remember the feel of Mer's arms around her the night before, the unspoken understanding that that was what they had now, since Leor, since... It had seemed enough. "Good for him," she managed to hiss back. "And not my problem."

Whatever response the woman had hoped for, that must not have been it, because she did not speak again. In the silence they were each left to contemplate their failures and resentments at

the feet of the tortured figure mounted brightly upon the wall.

At last, the Caller came in and began the Women's worship, exhorting them all to resist their sinful natures and find their way to God through hard work and submission, and if he saw the contradiction in giving that lecture to women held working in a brothel, it was lost in the fiery sermon. Fari kept her head low and let herself be carried away by the man's words, exchanging unbearable hurt for familiar hatred instead.

When it was finally over, she slunk out the door ahead of everyone else, half-way back to the cable terminus before she remembered Borrn's instructions. Anger and anxiety mixed uncomfortably in the empty pit of her stomach. In the years the previous Rep had been here, he only did medical checks for the annual report.

When she walked in the clinic door, the company doctor and the Rep were both there. *Oh, hell no*, she thought, barely managing not to say it out loud. "I have a right to privacy," she said.

"You have no such thing," the Rep said, "unless you have the sixty-five thousand, two hundred and eleven credits needed to redeem yourself from your contract."

"I do have a right to have a woman present, to insure *propriety*," she said, hoping she said the word right.

She must have, because the Rep shrugged. "Of course," he said. He went to a side door and opened it, and the prostitute who had been beside her during Worship walked in.

"You will be witness during the proceedings, such that you can lawfully attest that no improper behavior occurred during this routine exam?" the Rep asked her.

"Yes, sir," she said, bowing her head.

"Then you will find fifty credits towards your account, to compensate you for any inconvenience," he said. "Thank you."

She turned, walked back out of the clinic, and he shut the door again behind her. Fari stared. "She has to stay," she said.

"She will swear that she did," the Rep said. "Now get undressed, and get up on the table. I want the full physical workup."

"I don't—"

"If you speak again, there will be a thousand credit debit to your balance," the Rep said. "I expect you to remain entirely silent unless and until I ask you a question. Is that understood?"

Tears burned at her eyes. "Yes, sir," she said.

He smiled. "Then we have an understanding," he said, and took a seat down at the foot of the examination table.

The doctor's face was impassive and closed, no sympathy there at all. Numbly Fari took off her boots and then slipped out of her pants and tunic and stood there. The Rep pointed and shook his head, and with shaking fingers she took off her undergarments as well and, trying to compose herself, folded everything up and set them neatly on an empty chair, naked in the chilly room.

The doctor led her to the table and gave her a hand up, and she lay back and tried to shut her mind down as he listened to her heart, ran a scanner over her body, checked her eyes and ears, and began working his way down.

"As we discussed, sir, this employee had a miscarriage about four months ago, out on the rock," the doctor said. "She was just at the start of the third trimester. Spent a tenday out on the rock – we all assumed we'd lost her – before she stumbled back in and got medical attention."

"Any indication that the miscarriage wasn't accidental?"

"No, sir."

The Rep got up, came over, put one hand against her knee. "Does there appear to be lasting damage, such as would imperil future child-bearing?"

"None that I can see," the doctor said.

"Good." The word hung in the air.

The Rep turned, grabbed his chair, slid it up beside the table. "Fari, right?" he asked, and she could only nod an affirmative. "My understanding is that you had physical relations with Leor, which is what resulted in your pregnancy. Is that correct?"

"He beat and raped me," she said.

The Rep shrugged. "Men have needs, and here you are working and living among them? I think we both know you wanted this sort of attention. This is not my concern," he said. "However, your supervisor, Borrn, asked me to take a second look at your records, said that you were the most

skilled of all his workers. I suspect he was trying to sway me to restore to you a man's share of work credit. Despite that, Borrn seems to be a sensible man, so I checked your records. And what do you know? Your aptitude scores are top of the charts. The Representative delegated to this shit-hole back when you were a kid spotted you playing some sort of ball game in the tunnels and recommended you for aptitude testing, and you scored higher than anyone else. An affinity for machines and an excellent rock-instinct – he put you on the maintenance crew until you hit your majority, and from there you managed to get placed on a mining team. Both are unprecedented assignments, but from what I can tell, ones you entirely earned.”

He reached out, ran one finger lightly down her abdomen. The One has gifted you with very talented genes,” he said. “We intend to expand that resource. Leor, for all his bluster and crass attitude, is not entirely unskilled, and since you’ve already paired, it would mitigate the stain of sin on you to do so formally. We will credit you both for any living children produced.”

“No,” she said.

“I didn’t ask a question. One thousand credit demerit.”

“No,” she said again. “He nearly killed me.”

“Two thousand credits. He has been made to understand that the company considers you a valuable asset, and has agreed that he will not commit any further harm to you, except in matters of routine marital discipline, if you submit yourself fully to him as wife. So we’re pairing you.”

“No,” she said.

“Four thousand credits demerit,” he said, and stood up, scowling at her. “I think you’re now in negative numbers, yes? And you would still choose to keep this stain on yourself, rather than be wedded to Leor?”

“I would rather die,” she said.

“Well.” He stood there contemplating her for a long moment, as she lay on the bench, shivering. “Most men are nothing more than live-stock,” he told her, his gaze wandering her body. “You breed them to try to enhance specific talents or desirable qualities – strength, endurance, compliance, not too bright – to make them bet-

ter workers. Give them the minimal education they need to do their jobs and nothing more, put them to work, provide prostitutes for them to spend their frustration on, and it’s a stable, profitable system. Women aren’t even that much. Women are vessels, with no purpose other than to make the next generation of workers. I am no more concerned about your opinion on how we make use of your body than I would care what a jar thought about whatever I wished to fill it with. Nod if you understand that.”

She nodded.

“The only true joy for women is in submission. Now, remember who’s in charge, and how much you have to lose, and do not speak again.”

BORRN WAS WAITING FOR HER AS THE DOCTOR led her out of the clinic, and whatever he saw in her face, he said nothing as he helped her to the cable terminus, got her in a car, and sent her alone back towards Rock 17.

Mer and Huj were both at the far end, holding onto a terminus post and joking together about something she couldn’t quite hear. When the cable car door opened and they looked her way, whatever it was died on their lips, and they both pushed off and tumbled forward.

“What happened?” Mer asked, reaching her first.

She opened her mouth, the pressure of the words to come almost unbearable, and then she remembered the feel of the prostitute’s elbows in her side, the sharp cut of her words. Wordlessly, she propelled herself out of the cable car and past them. Huj reached out, caught her hand. “Fari,” he said. “You can trust us.”

“Can I?” she asked. “And you, Mer?” She met his eyes, not for long, but long enough for his face to redden and for him to turn away.

“I don’t...” Huj started to say, looking between the two of them, and Fari pulled her arm free and kicked off for the tunnel to her room.

Behind her, Huj made to follow, but Mer put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said, the words just reaching her as she turned, half-blinded by tears, away from them, as if she could run away from everything.

Once she was behind a locked door, she turned on the shower, but the water wouldn’t turn

warm. *Insufficient credit*, the cracked display informed her, so she took it cold. Once she'd dried off, she wrapped herself in the warm cocoon of her hammock and stared at the ceiling, shaking, for a very, very long time.

IN THE MORNING, IT WAS HUI WHO TAPPED AT her door. "Fari?" he called, sounding unsure of himself. "I've brought you food. I... Mer and I talked for a long time last night. We... He guessed that one of the brothel women spoke to you? He's sorry, he didn't mean to hurt you."

"Then why isn't *he* here apologizing?" she called out, still buried deep within her hammock. It was Green Team's day off, and she didn't intend to leave her room, or her bed, for anything or anyone.

"I guess Leor bought a sick day, because the Rep sent Mer over to sub for him," Hui said.

Sick days were costly. Too costly – Hui had once worked with two broken ribs because he didn't want to take the hit to his balance, and Leor didn't have nearly the same cred. She felt her stomach drop another notch. "Hui," she said. "Leor might be coming here. He's going to remember yesterday."

"Why would he come here?"

"The Rep wants to marry me to him, to remove my *sin*."

There was a long pause. "Fari?"

"I said no," she said, then with more bitterness than she imagined she could still have left in her, "the Rep *doesn't like* 'no.'"

"You stay in there, okay? I'm going to go check the cable line for incoming traffic, just in case. We aren't going to let anything happen to you again."

"Hui..."

"Yes?"

"Check in when you're done, okay?"

"Will do."

She listened to Hui's boots trudging away down the corridor, almost drowned out by the loud thumping of her heart in her ears. It took several minutes before she became aware of a vibration coming through the walls, growing in pitch and intensity. *Someone's landed a rocket bike*, she realized; Rock 17 was dense enough to conduct sound from the exterior well down into the tunnels.

Pulling herself out of her hammock, she suited up as quickly as she could. There wasn't anyone she could think of that would come here that way, unannounced, that wouldn't be trouble. She had no intention of waiting helplessly in her bunk.

She activated her boots long enough to walk over to her door, set the intercom to two-way open, and then she opened the door a crack, slipped through it out into the hallway. Reaching in and around the door, she placed her motion device on the floor just behind it, then shut and locked the door. It wouldn't go off unless someone forced the door open and hit it; if that happened, she'd know a lot more about the intentions of whoever was here. Done, she grabbed a wall bar in the corridor, deactivated her boots, and, pushing off lightly, floated silently down the corridor, alert for any sounds above the hum of the air handler systems.

The terminus was at the far end of Rock 17 from her rooms, with a veritable maze of old mining tunnels surrounding the habitat. She pulled her helmet on and sealed it, turned on her suit heater, and took one of the airlocks down into the old tunnels.

Her thinking had been to hunker down in the tunnels until she heard Hui, over the intercom, tell her everything was okay. Once in the tunnels, though, she found herself drifting towards the old safety retreat, a century abandoned, at the far end of the maze.

She could feel the creak of the old airlock as she opened the first door, slipped inside, and pressured up the lock. The inner door groaned and strained, but just as she was about to panic it began to grind its way open, spilling her out into the small quarters.

It was a small space: a medical bay, a comms office, and a toilet room, meant to be a retreat and central response point in case of a mine disaster. Lights flickered slowly alive as the long-disused systems responded to her presence. She watched her suit readout until the oxygen mix hit breathable levels, then popped off her helmet and stared around the retreat. She saw no signs of the tenday she'd spent here four months ago, which was good. She didn't want anyone else stumbling on this place and retracing her steps.

Folded neatly and pressed into a holding cubby was a plastic life-envelope, as if it had never been used.

She hadn't ever wanted to leave this place, but someone would have come looking for her, eventually. If she'd been male, it would have been sooner. *If I'd been male, I wouldn't have had to hide here in the first place*, she thought ruefully.

The knock startled her so badly she tried to jerk herself around and lost her equilibrium, began a slow spin across the room. It came again, and she realized she was hearing it over her link to her room intercom – someone was at her door there, not here. *Oh please*, she thought. She patched her mic into the open relay. “Huj?”

“Sorry,” a familiar, hated voice came through. “Open up for your brand new husband, like a good wife.”

Leor. She'd known it would be him, really.

“Where's Huj, Leor?” she asked.

“He wasn't very hospitable to me,” Leor said. “And here I was coming for my honeymoon day, too. The Rep even lent me a bike so we could have the whole day together.”

“I'm not your wife, Leor. Go home.”

“Rep said you'd say that, but you know what? He don't care, and I sure don't. So let me in, or I'm breaking this door down, and then I'm going to be mad.”

Even though she wasn't there waiting on the other side of that door, she felt frozen where she was, the memory of terror still palpably real. “Rep said you can't hurt me.”

“Rep said I can't make it so you can't procreate,” he said. “I plan on *procreating* with you till you cry my name so loud the whole damned rockpile can hear it, and knows I *own* you.”

And here's the anger, she thought with relief, as it raged through her mind like a solar flare had gone off there. “I don't know, Leor. From what I remember, I'm not sure you can manage to stay in a woman long enough for her to say *two* whole syllables. Maybe you should shorten your name and then come back.”

She wished she'd turned down the volume on her earpiece before she said that, because the crash that followed left her wincing. *He's throwing himself at the door*, she realized. The door would hold for a while, though his temper

would hold longer. If she knew anything about him, it was that he beat things until he got what he wanted.

It would buy her a little time, if she was willing to take some risk.

She put her helmet back on, checked that her bottles had recharged automatically while in the oxygen-rich environment, then cycled herself back out of the mining retreat with a first aid kit and the life-envelope. She could feel each step ahead unfolding in her mind, like some terrible winged thing, and it filled her with a giddy rage.

If Leor'd run into Huj, he must have come in at the terminus; he wouldn't know Rock 17 well enough to find any of the other external airlocks. She could still hear him pounding on the door, expending himself, though she'd turned down the volume enough to blur the words of whatever threats he was shouting.

Huj was floating, motionless, above the terminus floor, blood caking his face around one ear, a metal bar slowly spinning nearby. Fari floated up, put one shaking hand against his chest, felt him breathe, and took a breath herself she didn't know she'd been holding. “Huj,” she said, shaking him gently.

He opened one swollen eye, blinked at her. “Fari,” he said. “Get out of here. Go, hide. Leor—”

“Shut up,” she said. She set her boots down on the floor, unclipped the first aid kit, took out a dermal, and peeled it off onto his arm. She watched him sink into sleep, fighting it the whole way down, then she shook out the life-envelope and slipped it around him, zipping it up around his face last. His eyes were scrunched up into a frown.

Grabbing one leg, she towed the limp and weightless man behind her back towards the tunnels.

She had just pulled Huj into the old retreat when there was a particularly loud crash through her earpiece and her alarm went off. Leor was in her rooms. Even with the volume turned down, she could still make out his dreadful voice as he began ransacking her room, looking for her, already describing in detail the “honeymoon” he had planned for her. Her rooms weren't large; it wouldn't take him long to realize she wasn't in there.

Unwrapping Huj from the envelope, she pulled him over to an old autodoc in the medical bay. The lid was stuck, and she had to kick it hard to get it to open. The motion sent her tipping over backwards, anchored by her remaining boot on the floor, and she winced as the ankle twisted just slightly in the boot as she managed to push herself back upright. Huj was still floating, serenely spinning, where she'd let go of him above the autodoc. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him down and into the bed liner.

The sudden string of curses over the earpiece was extraordinary. "Where the hell are you, you goddamned whore?" Leor screamed.

"I just went out for a breath of fresh air," she answered. "Make yourself at home, why don't you?"

There was a crash, garbled, and then a squeal of feedback as the intercom unit in her rooms went dead. He'd be coming for her now, if he could find her.

She was stuck, she realized, between Leor and the Rep, and her own absolute conviction that she would not give either of them the opportunity to have her alone again. Not alive, anyway. She wished she could leave Huj a note, but she could barely write, and she knew Huj – who had been sold from one place to another for most of his childhood, before he reached the nadir of the rockpile, couldn't read. Instead she leaned in and kissed his forehead, then shut and sealed the lid.

She didn't expect she'd see him again.

Outside the old retreat, in one of the many pits and crevasses that ran through wall and floor alike, she had been carefully stashing stolen tools. The men were subject to regular pat-downs, but no one had ever checked her; if it was because they thought, as a woman, she wasn't smart enough to escape, or brave enough to try, she didn't know and didn't care. It had allowed her to repair the lifepod to the extent she had, and engineer a few other surprises into Rock 17 during endless insomniac nights over the years.

Fari gathered up the toolbag, strapped it across her front so it wouldn't interfere with her air bottle, and made as quickly as she could towards one of the other abandoned airlocks, this one leading out onto the rock near the terminus. If she'd gauged the sound right, there was a rocket

bike waiting there.

It was tethered right where she expected it to be, just above the cable terminus entrance, only barely out of sight. She caught the tether with ease, swung herself up beside the bike, and began looking it over.

The fuel cell was hovering at around 15%; the bike could barely make it out of the rockpile on that, much less get as far as the nearest freehold outside Basellan territory. She had just pulled a wrench off her frontpack when she noticed the small relay attached to the cell, nearly hidden behind the bike's heat transfer stack. The relay had a small receiver built into it, and was wired to send the cell into overload. If Leor had gone off-course, or tried to take advantage of the bike in some way the Rep didn't want, bye-bye Leor. She clicked open her link to the base intercoms.

"In case you don't know, Leor, the Rep doesn't give a flat black rock about your genes," she said. "It's mine he values."

"Where the hell are you?" came the immediate response. From the sounds in the background, he was tearing something apart.

"Not where you are," she said, and closed the link again so she could concentrate on removing the cell and relay intact. She had a use for them, could feel all the parts clicking together in her mind. Leor and the Rep had given her exactly what she needed. Now all that was in short supply was time.

"LEOR, WHERE ARE YOU?" SHE ASKED OVER THE link as soon as she'd reactivated it.

"Found your little tunnels," came the immediate response, over silence. "How long do you think you can hide in there before your air runs out? Didn't think I could figure out you're in a suit?"

"You're right, I am," she said. "I've got a couple of hours left on my tank, though."

"I can wait a couple of hours. Why don't you just come out now, and I'll take it easy on you, make it *nice*. I won't offer again."

"I'm sure you won't," she said. "But I wonder – how much damage can I do to this fancy bike of yours in a couple of hours? I imagine the Rep made it clear what he'd take out of you if you let anything happen to it."

"You're bluffing."

"Let's see...it's a Basellan model, of course. A G-449, older model, and you left an empty can of skunk on the seat. You aren't high, are you, Leor? There's fines for that."

"Don't touch the bike."

"Come stop me. Oh, and Leor? Hurry."

She waited for him in the cable terminus, her suit still on but her faceplate open. Her boots were clamped down to the deck and she had one arm looped around one of the ubiquitous wall-bars, beside the airlock out to the surface and his bike. She could hear him as he careened off walls, any grace of movement lost in haste, and she could remember him breathing heavy on top of her, and this time, for once, it didn't make her cry.

He came sailing around the corner, still wearing his work overalls from the day before, his face red from exertion and anger. When he saw her he smiled, and she smiled back at him, and both smiles were predatory.

Leor grabbed a bar, pulled himself around, got his boots down on the floor. "Fari," he said, almost snarling her name.

"Leor," she said. "Are you sorry for what you did to me?"

"Sorry?" He tripped over the word, staring at her. "I'm not the one who's going to be sorry," he said. "I'm not the one who's going to be begging—"

"This is your last chance," she said, and put one hand on the control panel for the airlock. "Ask for forgiveness."

"Stupid bitch, there's a whole safety system that won't let you open that," he said.

"I rewired it," she said.

"You expect me to believe a woman—"

"I expect you to die, Leor," she said. "Believe that."

He rushed her. She pulled the lever.

The entire air volume of Rock 17 tried to crowd past her, and she clung to the bar as long as she could, long enough to see Leor go flying past her, eyes wide with fear, out into the vacuum of space.

"I lied," she said over the comms, though he was beyond hearing the moment she'd opened the door. She was torn from the bar and out after

him, the safety tether she'd coiled up behind her snapping taut and leaving her flailing at the end of it. "This place makes us all monsters, and I had no forgiveness to offer you anyway."

She'd decompressed all of Rock 17. Huj was safe enough in the autodoc, as long as someone came along to let him out.

Alarms would be going off now, all over Station.

As soon as the pressure of the escaping air had let up, she pulled herself back along the tether until she reached the surface again. She'd pinned her toolbag against the rock, and pulled it free, taking out a hand-spider for the cable line.

The spider powered up the moment she clamped it around the cable she wanted. Grabbing hold with both hands, she squeezed and the spider zoomed down the line.

She hit Rock 44 hard. Forty-four was Team Green's mine-in-progress, so there was no airlock, no safety zone, just a few bars and a lot of need for care. She almost missed the nearest bar on first grasp, but then caught it with the tip of her fingers on a second swipe and just managed to pull herself in close enough for a better grasp.

Her mining rig was where she'd left it, at the entrance to the gigantic hole they'd eaten into the rock like some sort of virus. She checked her chrono as she climbed into the cab; she had to time things just right.

Sealing herself in, she checked that the cabin was airtight and then pressured it up. Once the inner atmosphere greenlit, she took off her helmet and bottle, most of her frontpack, and climbed into the driver's seat. Pulling the safety harness tight, she reached up and tore the camera eye from its mounting and ground it beneath her boot heel.

Then she checked her chrono again.

It's time, she told herself, as if the words could make her more brave. She could see the pinprick of light that was the Rep's ship, already moving towards Rock 17, no doubt responding to the depressurization alarm. She couldn't pick out the rocket bike until its engines, wired with an old timer out of the retreat kitchen, fired up right on schedule. Then it was a bright streak in the sky, already half-way towards the edge of the rockpile, and the Rep's ship turned in pursuit.

She'd pointed the bike in a cut-through between Rocks 3 and 9, and set it in motion with a leaking airtank strapped to the underside. Those rocks made it hard for the Rep's ship to follow, made it look like it was trying to evade.

"Come on, *come on*," she said out loud, pounding the rig console with her fist. "Do it, you self-righteous bastard!"

She saw the explosion bloom and dissipate, not Leor's bike, but back on the surface of Rock 17. The ancient hulk of the colony skip lit up briefly in the glare as the long-dead ejection mechanism of one last lifepod, wired up to the Rep's detonator, was triggered remotely into overload. Her last, fleeting glimpse of the lifepod was as a shadow crossing in front of Rock 4, headed out into space.

The Rep's ship slowed; they would have detected the detonation on the rock, know now that the bike was a decoy. It turned, banking, and passed directly in front of the mine entrance on Rock 44.

Fari fired up the rig's engines on full, hitting the lower edge of the ramp at the enormous machine's top speed, and exited the rock itself at only slightly less than that. The rig's momentum carried it out across the intervening space.

The ship banked again, trying to swing down below it, but not quickly enough. Fari threw her hands up over her face as the rig slammed into the side of the ship.

Against all expectation, the cabin held. She scrambled for the rock claws and managed to lock the rig tightly onto the Basellan cruiser. Pulling down her goggles, she began powering up the impact head and injection systems.

One light blinked orange, and stayed that way even after she thumped the panel. Then she remembered the relay she'd swapped for a bad one; no one had fixed it yet. The retraction system was offline.

Oh well, she thought, *I knew this was a one-way trip anyway*.

She punched a large hole in the side of the ship with the impact head. As it bored its way through the multi-layered hull, she opened the comm channel, found the open link. "This is mining rig *Furious Bitch* knocking. Can you hear me in there?"

The voice that came back wasn't one she recognized, but the Basellan accent was thick; the ship's Captain, no doubt. "Back away right now," he said, "or we'll be forced to take extreme measures. Once you're off my hull, we're willing to talk."

Talk, right. For however few minutes until they got the upper hand back, then they wouldn't care about talking any longer. She could see the patrol bikes, along the perimeter of the rockpile, now converging fast and furious on the ship. Somewhere out there, out of sight, a ladybug was slipping past them, unnoticed.

"Is the Representative there?"

"I am." The Rep's voice made her whole body feel like ice. "Whatever it is you want, the Captain has my authority—"

"Do you know what the difference is between people, and livestock, and vessels?"

"You wouldn't d—"

"Vessels don't bite back, Company Man," she said. "And I do. So fuck you all the way to Hell."

She withdrew the impact head and punched the injectors forward, depositing their twin payload of explosives into the ship's hull. In moments she had emptied both microweb cartridges into the ragged holes after them, sealing them in.

"I say again, stand down and back off," the ship's Captain said. "You don't have the arming code, so you can't do any more damage than you've already done, and I've got men heading your way to take you out."

"I guess we'll see," she said, and switched the comms over to the mine channels, seeking out Blue Team's signature. Whatever further the Captain or the Rep had to say, she didn't care to hear it.

"Mer?" she said, as soon as the comms locked on Blue Team. "You out there?"

"Fari, is that you? What happened? They said Rock 17 decompressed. I thought... And Huj—"

"Huj is hurt but okay, Mer. You'll need to go find him. He's in the old tunnels under our hab. Get him and yourself out, if you can. They're going to be unable to chase you for a while, but when they come back, they're going to be very angry."

"Fari, what are you—"

"I'm almost out of time," she said, and she saw that she was. The charges were ready to detonate, and she could see small lights now swarming up and over the hull towards where her rig clung, partially embedded, in the side of the cruiser. "There's something you need to know. The mis-carriage..."

"You don't have to—"

"It wasn't Leor's, Mer. It was yours. She was yours."

"I don't... We didn't... I was afraid to touch you, to hurt you the way he did. I— That's why I—"

"I was already pregnant when he attacked me, Mer. The baby wasn't early. I lied. But Mer, I couldn't give another child to this place, especially not a girl. You understand that, right?"

"Fari, I don't—"

"Shut up, Mer. I sent our daughter out of here. She's beautiful, and tiny, and has your nose, and she's gone now. If you can, try to get free yourself. I love you." She closed down the link before he could reply, and because the tears were making it hard to see.

Damned goggles, she thought, and pulled them off her face and threw them to the floor. She pulled up the keypad and began to punch in the arming sequence – the previous number, plus the next prime in sequence. Did they really think she wouldn't pay attention, see the pattern? They never thought she could think at all, never even saw her as human.

There was a man leaping from the ship, weapon raised, towards the cabin viewshield. She typed in the last number, blew the man a kiss, and pulled the trigger. The ship before her crumpled into orange and white, blinding and growing and moving outward, and Fari thought, last of all, that she had never seen such a truly joyful thing.

Suzanne Palmer is a writer and artist who lives on the top of an ice-covered mountain in western Massachusetts, which she tries hard not to fall off of. Though when she does, she has found that being stuck home with broken limbs is great for making extra writing time. Suzanne has been published several times in *Interzone*, and also in our sister magazine *Black Static*, where she has a story – 'House Party Blues' – in the current issue.

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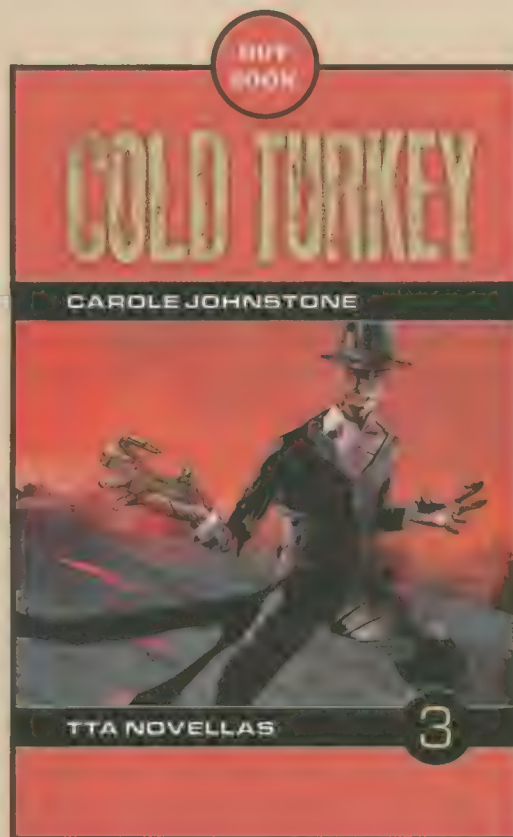
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“Thank you, come again,” Yopu’s voicebox says, a dutiful, automatic monotone.

The customer grunts in response and hurries to an unoccupied section of brick wall near the street. Turning her face to the wall, she stuffs the immaculate white dumpling into her mouth with fingers that look like they’ve never seen the inside of a bathhouse. Her face is filthy, too, grimy under a shock of orange and green hair, and pale against her black unitard.

On slow days, like when stinging rain falls in sheets over the sooty alleys and crowded thoroughfares of the prefecture, Yopu might sell forty dumplings. Then he’ll spend the rest of his day lumbering from corner to corner on his daily route, and thinking. Not really thinking, just collating data according to program.

He decodes slogans hidden or overtly displayed in graffiti splashed across brick walls and bamboo fences, and thinks about what trends the words indicate. A popular one says *Die, Moddies*, and another reads *Go home*. A phrase, spray-painted with a swirling, elegant script in shades of purple, says *Free Nickelhart, assholes*. Yopu wonders what Nickelhart is, and why it should be free. Nothing is free, not in an exchange economy where a dumpling costs two credits.

Yopu considers the shifting topography and demographics of the city, and adjusts his route as needed. The city’s sloping streets, carved out centuries earlier and paved with brick sluiced over in segments by black asphalt, steam and soften in the roiling heat of summer. The decaying geometries of proud old architecture slant and sigh against abutting modernity, brash in plastic gaudiness. Tenements skirt the market district, and light sleepers nest in alleyways near the commercial zone, alert to the urgencies of life and its sudden conclusion.

Yopu watches migrations from the outer bank of the river near the spaceport, where refugees land, to the inner city and its slums. He notes the numbers of reptilian Newcomers, forever blinking in the unaccustomed brightness. The recent immigrants are easy to distinguish from assimilated city-dwellers, who quickly abandon traditional woven skirts for bright jumpsuits and cheap, chromed sunspecs. He watches with rea-

soning curiosity as the numbers of non-humans grows and coalesces in the western sector of the city. Newcomers require dumpling service as much as anyone else. He makes calculations based on multiple factors.

No one but Yopu knows about the thinking he does. Even if he had someone to tell, and he doesn’t, he has no words in his speech programming to convey his thoughts.

His third daily stop brings him to the corner nearest the Municipal building, a crumbling red brick monolith that serves as the hub of bureaucracy and justice for the prefecture. Massive stone steps unfurl from its base like the silken lines of the Imperial flag that curls and snaps high on the pole above. Attorneys, lobbyists and lawmakers fast-walk in and out. Each is trailed by one or more modified bodyguards, bulky in their kevlar jumpsuits and often sporting tails or feathers. Most hurry through the chill morning air to waiting rickshaws, glancing back over their shoulders. Every day, one particular lawmaker, a man with bushy eyebrows, graying temples and lawmaker’s briefcase, stops on the corner of Lotus Blossom Lane for a dumpling. His blue legal robes flap in the damp summer breeze while he slurps his dumpling from the paper cup. Yopu lingers longest here, mostly for the abundant indigents and Newcomer children who cluster around him clutching precious credits.

On Tuesday, on this busy corner, Yopu sees the girl with the dirty hands again.

She waits in silence behind a diminutive man in a multicolored robe and two giggling female porcupine Moddies who appear to be exactly alike and are engaged in animated conversation. The girl orders two dumplings this time and pauses to regard him, looking directly into the dusty mono-lens mounted on Yopu’s torso.

“You’re a good ’bot, aren’t you?” she says in a low voice, deeper than her slight frame would indicate. She pats him once, a hand touching Yopu’s side just out of his camera’s range.

It is simple to match her face to previous encounters in a database of customer interactions. Her face is clean today, and her large eyes are wide unnatural pools of purple under her orange and green hair. She swipes a generic credchip, a

no-name quickcard that functions like cash on the street, and hands one of the dumplings off to a lanky figure behind her whose face is hidden deep inside the dark interior of a stained gray hoodie. The pair squats together next to the decaying building, and they confer over the dumplings in whispers. She glances back at Yopu once, twice. Her eyes flick between the robot, her companion and the front steps of the Municipal building.

Yopu loses sight of the girl and her companion when a crowd of tussling Newcomer children surround him, shouting over one another for Yopu's attention. A steady stream of customers occupy him until his red "empty" indicator clicks on.

"Sir or Madam, I regret to inform you that this dispenser's contents are sold out. Please come again."

"Damn," says a single customer, the every-day lawmaker. He fumbles with his tattered briefcase as he tries to tuck away a blue government credchip. His owlsh bodyguard stands a few feet away, disinterested in dumplings but on the alert.

A Newcomer child approaches.

"Hey, Mister Owl, can you turn your head all the way around?"

The Moddie bodyguard obliges, twisting to peer with enlarged eyes over his shoulder at the child from under tufts of brown-gold feathers. The child gives a reptilian squeal of delight and claps its leathery hands.

"Buy me a dumpling?" it asks.

"Scat!" says the owl's human lips, and he raises his taloned hands in mock threat. The child dances away.

A subroutine activates, and Yopu's servos power up. He steps off the curb and waddles down the street.

A while later, when he finds himself powering down in an alley in the warehouse district, Yopu begins to suspect something faulty in his programming. The coordinates of the alley do not match any prior destination record. The red indicator means he should return to the DDS warehouse, not squat in an alley in the dark. He switches on his headlamp, at low power to conserve energy.

A hooded figure stands in front of Yopu, illuminated in the lamp's glow. A dog's face, with the gold and black markings of a German Shepherd, emerges from the hoodie's shadows and bares its teeth.

"Here he is, Injee." The mechanical voice comes from a small box clipped to the dogboy's hoodie. The bared lips do not move.

A scrabbling sound, and the dirty girl comes climbing down a nearby gutter pipe, catching toeholds as deftly as a ninja. She lands next to Yopu, her breath hanging in the air for a moment as a cloud of vapor.

"Here's our good little 'bot," she says in her curiously deep voice, and touches his side as she had earlier that day. This time, he hears a *beep*. "Come on, then."

Yopu finds no appropriate pre-recorded response to the request in his database, but when the dirty girl and her dogboy companion walk away, he follows.

"What does it need language circuits for?" the girl asks. "You're just reprogramming it to do the job."

"You're asking me?" says the dogboy's talkbox. "Injee, you're asking me, the talking dog, why it needs to be able to talk."

Injee says nothing.

"I'm giving him the circuits because I want to, how's that?"

Yopu watches Injee through his mono-lens. Zooming in, he detects a slight flush on her cheeks, and a three-inch scar on her temple at the edge of the orange and green hair.

"That's not where I'd start, is all," she says. She sits cross-legged on a sagging plastic chair, eating from a pink take-out carton with chopsticks. An overhead industrial lamp casts a circle of light around her and the dogboy, who works at a rolling workbench topped with a diagnostic monitor. Six separate cables run from the monitor to the panel on Yopu's backside.

"Don't you want to hear what kind of thoughts one of these has?" Not a touch of irony in the mechanical voice.

"It's a robot, Blue. It doesn't have thoughts. They just do what you tell them to do."

"That's what they used to say about dogs."

"Until Nickelhart gave you that chip, you were just like any other dumb dog, following commands for a pat on the head."

Blue puts down a pair of wire cutters and pushes back his magnifying goggles. The two regard one another for a moment, with Yopu looking on in silence.

"He can hear you, you know," Blue says.

The light of morning shines through the high windows of the warehouse, and Yopu scans the dusty space for signs of his captors.

Noisy words inside him, in his programming, where no words had been before. In the past, concrete words like *customer*, *Newcomer demographic analysis*, *credits*, *route*, *supply protocol*, and abstract but viable, quantifiable words such as *perfection* had been all he needed.

All he had possessed.

Now there are myriad words for sights and sounds, bumping and jostling against one another for his attention: in the beams of light streaming from the high windows, *motes* dance. On a pallet near the workbench, the dogboy Blue *snores*. And along the walls, visible now in the warm, growing light, faces that are not faces, rows and rows of them, of varying sizes.

Dolls. Yopu knows these are called dolls.

Free of the cables, he tests his ability to move and finds that he can. He half-rolls on extended casters and takes three tentative steps forward on his square feet, a lurch of movement that brings him close enough to scan the faces of the dolls more closely.

"They're not people," says the muffled mechanical voice of the dogboy from the pallet. Yopu swivels to look in Blue's direction.

"They can't think, can't talk," says the dog, sitting up and straightening his hoodie, which has become twisted about his neck in the night.

"I know," says Yopu. He stops; his metal head swivels from side to side. Curious, this sensation of knowing, like one sound among a chorus of clattering sounds seeping through into clarity.

"But they are beautiful, aren't they? Perfectly formed."

"Perfect. I know what that means." A sense of wonder.

"Of course you do."

"They're perfect," says Yopu.

Words, noisy words, in his mind.

So many words it hurts.

"We have a job for you, little robot," says Injee.

"My name is Yopu." Yopu tries to roll towards her, but backs away instead, unsteady.

"How does it know?" Injee says, glancing over at Blue. The dogboy is twirling a screwdriver, watching a beam of sunlight bounce off its shiny stem, patterning the warehouse walls with tiny shimmers.

"He knows all sorts of things," says Blue, teeth bared in a hideous grin.

Injee rolls her eyes. "Did you tell it about Nickelhart?"

"The programming has to integrate."

Yopu continues shifting backwards until he bumps into the wall.

"Three days until the demonstration," says Injee.

A doll dressed in red satin teeters, falls from the shelf in a splatter of porcelain shards.

Yopu scans the broken doll and emits a dismayed tone.

"Yes." Blue growls, low and threatening. "He'll be ready."

"Protocols indicate I should return to DDS warehousing," says Yopu. A slight change in pitch works its way through his language circuits.

"Are you whining?" asks Blue. A hint of amusement is evident in his mechanical voice. He is squatting on top of the stool at the workbench, painstakingly gluing shards of doll's head together into a more or less coherent face.

Silence from the bulky form of the robot.

"You want to go back? They'd erase your new programming." Blue regards him with a steady gaze. The robot's servos whir as he shifts backward and forward, side to side.

"No," Yopu says.

Blue sets the fractured doll face aside. "Now, you're ready." His toothy muzzle seems to smile.

When Injee returns, Yopu is plugged into Blue's programming tablet.

"Updating it, finally?" she says, flopping down on the dog's tidy pallet with a yellow envelope in her hand.

"Get off my bed," Blue says, not looking up from the tablet.

"I bought this blanket," she says.

"You're filthy."

"Screw that. Here, I got what you wanted."

"Right." He hops down from the stool and takes the yellow packet from her outstretched hand.

"Ha. Made your tail wag," she says. She rolls over and within minutes she's breathing deeply, eyes closed, on the rough pallet. The broken edges of her fingernails, some cracked and bloody, curl around the blanket.

"What's wrong with her hands?"

"Come on over here, Yopu."

Yopu rolls on his casters to Blue's side, careful to steer clear of the snaking cables.

"What is in the envelope?"

"And now Yopu manifests curiosity," says Blue. Somehow his canine face conveys pleasure, and he commences ripping open the paper packet.

"You haven't answered my questions, why don't you answer?"

"Climbing buildings is rough on the hands, I guess. But she did it for this," says Blue, holding a tiny microchip up to the overhead light. "And this, little 'bot, this is purpose, writ large. And it's about to be yours."

"Test number thirty-seven."

"Excuse me, Blue, but this is test thirty-six."

"Thanks, Yopu."

Injee groans. "This is taking too long."

"You wanna do this? Stop rushing me."

"I don't know what you're doing, even."

"Watch." Blue turns away from the programming tablet and disconnects the data cable protruding from Yopu's back. "He's unhooked, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Yopu, who is the most important human in the city right now?"

"Thomas Nickelhart."

"Why?"

"Nickelhart is a man of peace. He works to free all of us from tyranny."

"Do you love Nickelhart?"

"Oh, this is bullshit," Injee interjects.

"Would you give your life for him?"

"Yes, I would, because it's the right thing to do."

"It's just repeating some programmed crap!"

"Why?" asks Blue. "Why is it the right thing to do?"

"Oh, this ought to be good," says Injee, folding her arms over her thin chest.

"Nickelhart is wrongfully imprisoned because he stood up against the sanctions on non-humans. Peaceful relations are the key to equality."

"You don't really think that. You're a machine."

"Machines are part of the non-human brotherhood, too."

"Do we need this, for it to talk?" Injee says, turning to Blue. Then, quieter, "About peace?"

"You want him to carry out his new programming, don't you?"

"It doesn't need to spout Nickelhart's rhetoric. It's just a machine." She throws her hands up in frustration or disgust. "Besides, how am I supposed to use that?"

"Language enhances purpose."

"It's not going to be talking to anyone. In fact, if it does, it could give away the plan."

"He's loyal, that's part of the programming."

"Then, make it loyal to me. Or loyal to this one task. It just needs to be devoted to one tiny demonstration, to take out one guy."

"You won't like that."

"You're supposed to do what I tell you while your master's waiting to get out. If this doesn't work, I'm going to tell him how you failed."

They glare at each other for a few long moments. Blue looks away, stalks over to the workbench.

"What do you want, Yopu?" Injee asks.

Yopu shifts back and forth on metal casters.

"To free Nickelhart." A tone of longing, of something more, a desire left unfulfilled.

"That's not enough. What else?"

Yopu looks in the direction of the broken doll, still lying forlorn and fractured on the workbench, and then down at the place, now empty, from whence perfect white dumplings once dispensed.

"Perfection. I want perfection. Everything is dirty and broken."

"You hearing this, Blue?"

"I hear," he says, growling softly, his back to the girl and the dejected robot.

"What if you could blast away all the things that are ugly, dirty and broken, Yopu? What if you could fill the world with light and make it beautiful, perfect?"

"Injee, don't," says Blue, his mechanical voice rising. "I can program him to care about the cause so he'll do the job. Don't you hear what he's saying?"

"Perfection is possible," says Yopu quietly. "But you want something else." He looks at Injee for a long moment.

"Wipe it," says Injee. "Then install the switch for the demonstration. Ten hours."

"Don't worry, Yopu. I didn't take it all."

"I'm not worried, Blue."

"We'll show her, alright. She's a human, a small thinker." The dogboy gives Yopu a backward glance and then clambers up an aging fire escape to the rooftop where Injee waits with her binoculars.

Yopu ambles to the corner near the steps of the municipal building and squats in his usual place. Passersby pay him no notice.

This is to be the day of proof of his loyalty to Nickelhart, the day he shows the world that the Beloved Master should be free, but there's something more. Yopu yearns to illuminate the heart of each man, woman, child, Newcomer, and Moddie. One shining moment for the world to see, a beacon of cleansing light. Starting with this one man.

The suited lawmaker, the one with eyebrows like rampaging caterpillars, and his owlish Moddie bodyguard come down the steps towards him. The man hefts his briefcase to reach into a pocket for a credchip, which he then waves in front of Yopu's reader.

No blinking light, no blip of confirmation.

Inside, looking out at the man through the mono-lens, Yopu thinks *light*, glorious and white. Almost time.

"Maybe it's out of order," says the bodyguard, glancing right and left, ever vigilant for external threat.

"Damn." The suited man groans and turns on his heel. The pair begin to retreat in the direction of the waiting rickshaw lineup at the foot of the massive steps.

From atop the nearby building, Injee and Blue peer through binoculars at the rickshaw.

"They're moving away, what is it waiting for?" Injee says. "If you've fucked this up—"

"Wait," says Blue. The dog's shaggy tale thumps on the concrete. "Wait for it."

Now.

A glow, then a searing blue fire, lights the ring Blue has configured around Yopu's neck joint. His circuits surge as power drains from his powerpack and the hot-wired backup kicks in. A whining sound, soft and then louder, and in an instant, the blue pulse expands. A circular blast radius ripples outward with Yopu at its brilliant epicenter.

Reptile urchins clustered on the nearby curb are the first touched by the blast. The light consumes them where they tussle over a bag of snacks, shoveling crumbs into their tiny pink mouths. For a fraction of a second, they glow, too, as though lit from within by pale fire. Then their charred forms crumble into fine ash. A pair of turquoise-colored sunshades lay among the dusty particles.

On the rooftop, Injee gasps, "Big, why is it so big?" Her rough little hand flies to cover her mouth. Blue hops and claps with delight, and slaps Injee on the back.

The owl-faced bodyguard turns his head all the way around to look toward Yopu for a fraction of a second, just enough for Yopu to glimpse his widening eyes as the pulse overtakes him and the lawmaker. The owl Moddie reaches for his ward's elbow, and his kevlar vest slumps to the pavement, gray ash flowing out through its armholes. The lawmaker's flowing synthetic robes flutter to the ground as he dissolves. Yopu's internal camera records every second.

The light passes through the nearest rickshaw driver, who utters a cry as it touches him, a slight, strangled sound. For a brief moment, his straw hat flares, a reddish flame shooting from its peak. He, too, disintegrates, and the wooden handles of the rickshaw; the metal body of the little two-wheeled transport tips over with a clatter. The wave of light flows on past.

Somewhere down Lotus Blossom Lane, a woman screams.

This, too, thinks Yopu, is perfection.

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THIS IS HOW YOU DIE

GARETH L. POWELL

First, there's the news. But you don't pay a great deal of attention to it, do you? You have other things to do. Eventually, though, you see the headlines on your timeline, reposted by friends. Another high school slaying in the States; a civil war in some godforsaken country somewhere in Africa or the Middle East; drone strikes in Central America; and those first, worrying reports from Angola, of a flu-like infection that's already killed eleven farmers and seems to have jumped from human to human...

1) You're on a train from Island Gardens to West India Quay. You're with your brother. You've been helping him move house and now you're on your way to a tapas bar to get something to eat. The lights of Canary Wharf shine through the rain. In the carriage there's this young Chinese guy wearing a German army shirt. He's scratching at a fresh tattoo on his forearm. Lightning flickers over the Thames.

Later that afternoon, you're walking with friends on Peckham Rye, kicking through piles of wet orange leaves. Jet planes whine overhead on approach to the airport. A green parakeet flits across the path.

Somebody sneezes, and you make a joke about bird flu.

2) A year later, you're living in the ruin of a terraced house somewhere in North London. You can't remember how you got there. Three other people live in the house, but you only know two of them. Understandably, you tend to keep yourselves to yourselves, and, when you meet, you have handkerchiefs clasped over your mouths.

Food is a problem, as is security.

You keep a wooden hockey stick next to the sofa cushions that serve as your bed, and an old carving knife tucked into the leather motorcycle boots you stole from the Goth guy who lived in the house opposite until the local kids put a petrol bomb through the plate glass of his living room window.

Those kids.

They run like feral animals, into everything. They know nothing of school, of games consoles or chart music. They've inherited a different world, a pandemic world. Most of their friends are dead. While you're still struggling to adjust, they're running wild. They don't know any other way. They have no context, nothing except stories. And who wants to listen to stories when there's petrol to pilfer and cats to catch?

Yeah, cats.

Even thinking about them makes your mouth water. It's been so long since you had any sort of meat.

3) When you were younger, you used to worry about zombies. They were all over the internet back then. People used to daydream about killing them. Your friends used to joke about what they'd do during a zombie apocalypse. Now, though, you know it isn't the undead that are the problem. Walking corpses would be preferable to the lying-still-and-decomposing kind. At least the walkers would keep themselves busy, and you wouldn't have to burn them.

Yes, daily cremations have become part of your routine. You can't let the dead fester. They breed disease and attract rats. At first, you and the others tried to keep a semblance of order and dignity. Later, as the numbers of the dead

increased, the process became steadily cruder. Now, it's all about lugging the bodies into a pile and setting them on fire.

4) Sooner or later, the water pumps are going to stop and the taps run dry. Then, you're going to have to move. You're going to have to find somewhere with a dependable supply of fresh water, untainted by waste or corpses, or radiation from the failing nuclear plants on the coast.

And, inevitably, every other fucker in the country's going to have had the same idea.

And so you pack your shit into a four wheel drive Honda that used to belong to the local playgroup leader. You take all the tinned food, and your hockey stick, and you head west.

5) You have to drive on the pavement a lot.

6) When you reach the A40, you find it clogged with abandoned cars. A military helicopter clatters overhead, heading for Heathrow. Foxes haunt the hard shoulder.

Once you get out past the M25, the traffic queues thin out and you pick up speed. You might even reach Oxford before nightfall.

7) What have you brought with you?

Photo albums?

Books?

A pile of old CDs?

A dead smartphone?

A dying ebook reader?

None of that crap's going to be worth as much as a pair of waterproof boots and a good knife.

8) Sticking to the back roads, you go a whole day without seeing another living soul, save for the crows flapping from the telegraph wires as you pass.

Somewhere in Wiltshire, on the forecourt of a deserted filling station, you start to sneeze, and tell yourself it's just a cold.

Back on the road, the villages you pass have been barricaded. The inhabitants are fearful of infection. Paint-daubed warning signs tell you to keep away.

9) Eventually, you find yourself on the street

where you grew up, standing on the pavement outside your childhood home. The place looks as if it's been empty a long time. Some of the windows have been smashed. The garden's a mess. You have no idea what brought you here.

Inside, the house smells of mildew. You try the radio in the kitchen, but the electricity's off. The cupboards are bare.

Despite the chill in the room, you feel hot and feverish. Right now, you'd give anything for a bowl of your mother's homemade chicken soup.

Newspapers lie scattered on the table. You can't bring yourself to look at them, so you try the stairs instead.

Outside, it's starting to rain.

10) When you were eight years old, this was your bedroom. You lie on the bed and close your eyes. If you squeeze them tightly enough, you can almost feel your old toys around you.

You stay there, wrapped in the blanket, listening as the rain taps skeletal fingers against the skylight. You remember the feel of your father's bristles, the way your mother used to call up the stairs when it was time for school.

How did all that warmth turn to cold and hunger, to transit camps and columns of refugees?

You start to sweat and shiver.

11) A sound comes from your sister's room at the end of the hall: the endless scratching of a record player repeating the same phrase over and over and over. You lie quietly on the bed, listening, wrapped in the musty blankets, too comfortable to move. Your long-dead best friend sits on the arm of the chair by the window.

"I just can't see the point any more," she says.

She starts to cry.

Lying there, you watch her walk out into the hall in her thick socks, to the top of the stairs, and you wonder if you should go after her. But the blankets are warm and you're very tired.

Your breath wheezes in your chest.

After a while, you pull the sheet up to cover your face.

This is Gareth's sixth story in *Interzone*. His latest novel, *Hive Monkey*, is out now from Solaris and reviewed in this issue. You can find him online at garethipowell.com.

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WOLVES

Simon Ings

Gollancz tpb, 304pp, £14.99

Paul Kincaid

Conrad's father has devised a jacket studded with sensors that allows blinded servicemen to see again; his best friend, Michel, gets into trouble for taking inappropriate photographs; Conrad himself gets into the new industry of Augmented Reality which can affect everything we see, and eventually brings this technology to the work of a major film maker. Everything in this stunning novel is about perception, or failures of perception. In the opening pages, Conrad is disturbed by the sight of his girlfriend's artificial hands, the consequence of crash that happened when he failed to see oncoming traffic. Later we learn that, as a child, Conrad disposed of the murdered body of his mother just so his father wouldn't see. What we see shapes what we make of the world, but our perceptions are easily deceived. I don't know that Conrad is an unreliable narrator, but what he perceives isn't necessarily the truth.

And what he perceives is a world quietly running down. We are in a near future where

technology is starting to make up for so much: artificial hands, artificial sight, augmented reality. But technology cannot compensate for other failings. Conrad's father's groundbreaking work on restoring sight brings no adequate financial recompense; eventually he is forced to give up his own researches to take a job with someone else, and so begins a downward career path that eventually sees him on the breadline. His failure stands for the economic problems we see all around in the background of the novel. Meanwhile, the environment is itself failing. When he and Conrad are children, Michel is obsessed with the end of the world. When we first encounter him as an adult, he and his wife Hanna are effectively building an ark, while he writes a novel about a flooded world. The novel is a success, the ark is abandoned, but by the end of *Wolves* the flooding has started.

A flooded landscape has long been a staple of British catastrophe fiction, and Ings recalls that tradition in this novel. But he twists it: we don't see the aftermath of catastrophe but its beginning, and only a brief extract from Michel's book hints that the heavy rains and swollen rivers may actually lead to such an effect. But catastrophe is there nevertheless, in lives increasingly detached from a world that isn't fully seen. Our first understanding of what augmented reality can do comes when Ralf, the technical wizard who is to be Conrad's business partner, gives him a demonstration and suddenly Conrad can no longer see the furniture he knows is in the room they occupy. It is a metaphor that hangs over the entire novel.

How much does Conrad fail to see of his psychologically damaged mother, his increasingly distant father, the obsessive and vaguely

threatening Michel, the sexually available Hanna? What other word but catastrophe could you put to the way so many things are falling apart in small ways? Near the beginning of the novel, a house in the country is trashed during the course of a party; near the end, Conrad and Michel trash the childhood home they once shared. It is a novel about despoiling things because we don't see they are there. In haunting prose that often recalls the work of M. John Harrison, Simon Ings has produced a work that is surely going to be one of the novels of the year.

A BEAST LICKING ITS CHOPS

Simon Ings interviewed by Paul Kincaid

You're a restless writer – cyberpunk, new weird, now a catastrophe story – is this a deliberate strategy?

Well I've always been impressed by the Zen stricture that if you meet the Buddha on the road, you should kill him. If you think you have the answer, it's time to formulate a different question.

Plus, I believe novels exist to explore all those parts of life

that aren't repeatable or testable – which is why I have a huge amount of time for books which are about "ordinary life", and no time at all for book series. I just don't see the point of it. If you want to work in television, *work in television*, for crying out loud, stop cluttering up the shelves.

All those important opinions aside, however, publishers shape writers' careers more than the



writers like to admit; I never much liked my original sf publisher and since the feeling was mutual I went off and did something else. Later I got drunk with an agent who thought I could write pop science. It turned out he was right. After that the chance popped up to ghost for one of the Davos set. I've never not leapt down a rabbit hole. The hope is that if you're good enough, a coherent set of values and concerns will emerge over time, and across a body of work that's been engaged with your life as you've lived it. And if that identity *doesn't* emerge in public consciousness, and Radio 4 *isn't* beating a path to your door well, who cares? You'll at least have *had* a life.

Okay, you're formulating a different question, but I wonder why that change of direction takes you back to one of the hoariest forms of British sf, the catastrophe?

The millhouse that sits at the heart of some of *Wolves's* darker flashback scenes is John Wyndham's old place – I grew up near there. The whole business of imagining catastrophe as an escape from the rich and scary Real is pretty much a gentle extrapolation and embellishment of my teenage friendships. My work is much more personal, much more autobiographical, than people give it credit for. Everything in this book is true besides the events. The generic aspects reflect my reading as a kid, rather than any pressing need I feel to enter into dialogue with "the genre". God forbid.

And while you say you hope for something coherent to emerge over time, is that what you really expect? Doesn't changing the question work against that?

What are you suggesting – that we each have *one* coherent personality



– one that's available to consciousness, and can be elucidated by answering *one* correct question? That's Facebook thinking. The personality of a body of work has its own integrity that unpacks itself over time. It sure as hell isn't going to jibe well with the author's Important Opinions.

There's something jagged in the structure of *Wolves*, constantly moving backwards and forwards in space and time. Was this always part of your plan for the novel?

Wolves doesn't actually have that complex an architecture: there are two chronologically coherent timeframes – the "before" and the "after", if you like – and I bounce the reader from one to the other at regular, lawful intervals.

The jaggedness has another source entirely, and that's the desire to cover thirty-odd years of future history (or alt history, or whatever you want to call it...) entirely through the subjective

experience of one character. My protagonist, Conrad, ventures an opinion now and again, but by and large the world is seen through his immediate consciousness. You don't get that very often in sf, because the perceived need to "build a world" keeps dragging you out of your characters' head. I was determined not to fall for that. (I *despise* worldbuilding.)

You can't get away with that, all sf is a form of worldbuilding, and the fact that you stick within Conrad's head doesn't make it any less worldbuilding, surely.

I absolutely can get away with this – to the extent that I hardly know where to begin taking down your objection. For the sake of brevity let's just define the row we're going to have by saying that "worldbuilding" and "making things up" are not synonymous concepts.

Given the amount of flooding we've had, both last year

and this, it seems almost disturbingly apposite. Was the novel written in response to these new weather patterns?

Funnily enough I recently asked the same question of Chris Priest in connection with *The Adjacent*. My answer is the same as his: not at all.

But of course, it depends on what you mean by "response". I lifted a lot of that imagery from dreams I'd been having, mostly around my mother, who was dying at the time, and (cf. Freud) about the river near where I grew up. I think any writer remotely in touch with his own life will be playing with the weather a whole lot in the coming years. How can you possibly write about the world and *not* factor in climate change? Kudos to Ian McEwan, by the way, who's been quietly mongering the weather for the whole of his career.

The problem is that I don't think you can write anything without the present seeping in and affecting it. I was just wondering how consciously the present was shaping your future.

I think a better way of putting this might be: which bits of present reality are we avoiding by projecting them on the future? There's remarkably little in SF that doesn't have its real-world, present-day analogue. SF prides itself on its thought-experiments but very, very few of the challenges, dilemmas and nightmares it throws up are unprecedented. Read more history. Read more anthropology. This is a point Thomas Disch made again and again in his career, not that many of us listened. Is *Wolves* set in "the future"? I'm honestly undecided. The question is more psychological than anything.

Actually I'm making an assumption that the novel is

set in Britain, but there are no place names. You use terms like "Middle" when referring to the city, which jars us from familiarity. And while our first visit to Michel and Hanna clearly takes us to Dungeness, you have displaced it to the north. Given that the flooding changes geography, is this loss of sense of place deliberate?

I wanted to write about a genuine technology, Augmented Reality, without getting tramlined into some dreadful dot-com satire. As I was writing, I found that adding a time or a place would immediately have the scene wilting like a lettuce. I quickly realised that the only way to tell truths about AR was to pull the technology out of the real world entirely, and run it through an entirely personal thought experiment. Of course doing something like that has all sorts of inadvertent consequences, which you can capitalise upon in the second draft. The floods, the weather, the shifting coastlines – all that came out of explorations of AR.

One of the major themes in the novel is perception, from restoring the sight of blinded servicemen to film-making to Conrad's work in AR. I know that a few years ago you wrote a book about the eye, so is the whole idea of perception something you find yourself coming back to all the time?

Yes, though I have no idea why. If this life of ridiculous side-projects ever does cohere into something, my bet is it'll resemble a peeled eyeball from the 1970s.

Has your work on *Arc* changed your own perceptions about science fiction?

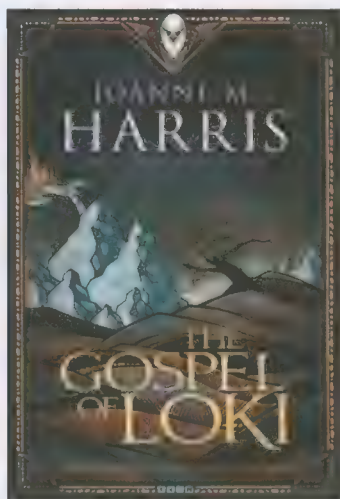
Many years ago – the night Princess Diana died – I was fleeing an SF convention at 120mph in a hired Vauxhall Vectra, chanting

"Never go back. Never. Go. Back." And the happy fact is, I never have to. In the years since, "SF" has ceased to mean anything: the young writers I meet now are co-opting its drivers, its preoccupations and its techniques without the slightest desire to "be science-fictional". (Yes, yes, I know there's a "core genre" out there, but it's got all the cultural currency of a caravan club; a Robin Reliant Users' Group; the readership of *Escort*. It's not dying. It's *dead*. Someone tell Ann Leckie.)

For the last couple of years I've been editing *Arc*, a journal of the future by the makers of *New Scientist* (arcfinitly.org is the blog). Almost no-one I meet – and this includes writers who came up through the genre – gives a fig for what SF is. Everyone's busy trying to see what this amazing toolkit – literary machines that saw us through the Cold War with our humanity bruised, twisted, but more or less intact – what all this strange, mostly Seventies technology can *do*.

I agree with you absolutely on this, but I still find myself endlessly wondering about this "literary machine". Is it now taking a distinctively different shape, and what might that shape be?

I think of that machine as a curious, dialectic combination of avoidances and exaggerations. It understands that fiction exists to *investigate* reality, not reflect it. (Reflect it *how*, for heaven's sake?) It's escapist and engaged, reminding us that "realism" is the biggest literary flimflam of all. You don't need SF to pull this trick off, of course – Cervantes managed quite well without it, thank you. But SF is one way – a good way – of keeping the spirit of burlesque alive. Underneath all that chromed, oh-so-rational motley, there's a beast licking its chops.



THE GOSPEL OF LOKI

Joanne M. Harris

Gollancz hb, 413pp, £14.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

I cannot remember when I did not know one version or another of the Norse myths. Most likely I began with Roger Lancelyn Green's *Myths of the Norsemen* (1960), or Oxford University Press's *Scandinavian Folk Tales and Legends* (1956) by Gwyn Jones. The version that sticks best in my mind is John James's masterly reworking of the myths, in *Votan* (1966) and *Not for All the Gold in Ireland* (1968). Here, Photinus, a Greek trader, undergoes a series of adventures in Northern Europe that bear an uncanny resemblance to aspects of Norse, Welsh and Irish mythology. While James suggests that some myths might have a factual basis, and that Photinus is also working old stories to his advantage, there are places when Photinus crosses into a liminal world where events are not easily explained.

Photinus is a quick-witted and charming rogue, who tells a good story. Joanne M. Harris's *The Gospel of Loki* suggests that she may have some acquaintance with James's work as her Loki tells

his story in a not dissimilar way. However, while Photinus kept one foot firmly in the real world, Loki is a purely magical creature, moving through mythic worlds; a shapeshifter, who gives birth to an eight-legged horse and fathers a werewolf. When Loki enters our world – the Middle World – it is a generic fantasy world of hovels, ale-houses and beddable young women in vaguely pre-medieval homespun, not a contemporary setting.

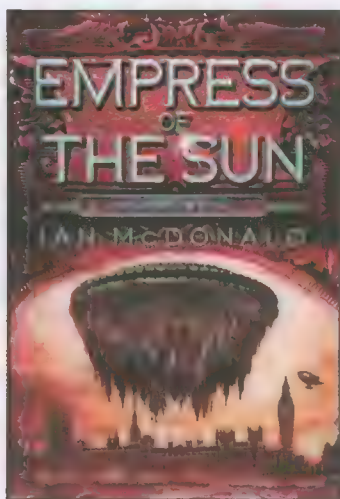
Like Photinus, Loki is jaunty and colloquial; a little too colloquial, in fact. His account is marked by a self-conscious use of contemporary language, as though he's desperate to show how relevant he still is. Which is strange given that one theme of this narrative is supposedly the power of words. This is Loki's own version of a story in which he is so often cast as the villain. Odin may have charge of the *authorised* version of events, but Loki is here to give us the *gospel* truth. (The Christian analogy is deliberately stressed, although it is picked up and put down at the author's convenience throughout the novel without ever becoming integral to the story.) Yet Loki's version of events turns out to be surprisingly, even disappointingly, similar to Odin's account. No revisionist narrative, this, whatever Loki might imply. Instead, it turns into a rather tedious justification of epic bad-boy behaviour, on the grounds that as the Aesir will never truly accept Loki, it is perfectly fine for him to embrace his outsider status and fulfil the Oracle's prophecy whichever way he chooses, because he is going to anyway. Thus, the creativity of free will is sacrificed to 'the Oracle made me do it'.

Harris's Loki is indeed more man-child than mythic figure. He may be Wildfire, son of Chaos, but this daemon behaves more

as though he is suffering from a mid-life crisis. He might as well be propping up a bar in the Middle World, whingeing about how he hates his wife, his mistresses don't understand him, his children are running wild, and worst of all, his dad has it in for him so he won't inherit the family firm, all the while eyeing the barmaid and hoping she'll take pity on him.

Harris's retelling is faithful in many ways to the original stories – all the familiar events are here, from the building of Asgard, through Odin's acquisition of writing and magical objects, the humiliations of Thor, and the death of Baldur. Yet somewhere along the line, Your Humble Narrator has turned into the worst kind of pub bore, droning on relentlessly, while myth becomes second-rate soap opera. There is little variation here: Loki describes all events in much the same tone. There are no moments of grandeur – not even in the fall of Asgard – or of pathos, though Sigyn's protection of Loki, chained while a snake sprays venom into his eyes, momentarily touches the heart, though one does want to lean in and say 'leave him, Sigyn, he ain't worth it'.

It may be that every generation gets the reworking of Norse myths that it most deserves. Harris's reworking is perfectly competent but to my mind bland: all surface, no depth, like a coat of magnolia paint in a rented property. Myths persist, surely, because of their continuing power to move the reader or listener yet Harris's version offers stories that have been somehow denatured. Loki provides a smoothly commercial account that reeks of mythic suburbia rather than epic grandeur. For all he may chafe at the situation in which he finds himself, it is Loki who told us this story in the first place. And Loki, it seems, has no imagination.



**EMPRESS OF THE SUN:
EVERNESS BOOK III**

Ian McDonald

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 389pp, £20.00

Duncan Lunan

Empress of the Sun is the third of a series of young adult novels, set in a series of alternative worlds – which puts the reviewer new to the canon at something of a disadvantage. There are an infinite number of alternative worlds, but hitherto only ten of them have been accessible to ours. The novel begins with the airship *Everness* emerging over an eleventh, unexpectedly in a nosedive instead of level flight, and not pulling up sufficiently to escape becoming embedded in the treetops, with two engines pulled off and lying somewhere astern on the forest floor.

The teenage navigator who finds himself unpopular as a result is Everett Singh from Earth 10, whose preoccupation is to find his father Tejendra, missing somewhere Out There among the many worlds (not the other father who died on E1). But Everett too has his counterparts on the other worlds, and the one on E10 has to deal with the usual young adult issues of school days, the opposite

sex, etc, with the additional burden of hidden weaponry to deal with an infestation of the self-replicating nanotech nasties which made E1 uninhabitable. So he has to keep his best mate, his girlfriend and his family from becoming targets without telling any of them what's happening or why his behaviour has changed so much.

The alternative Earths have major differences between them but there's an attempt at overall government called the Plenitude of Known Worlds. The technology of the nonhuman Thryn is everywhere, especially on E4, whose people "had not developed a technology or made a scientific discovery of their own in thirty years"; E2 has the fullest grip on what's happening and the best of everything, E5 has Victoriana and five different varieties of humans, and E3 is a good compromise if you can live where you choose. E7 is a world of twins which has adapted most readily to an expanded reality of multiple worlds. On E2 Britain is apparently merged with Gibraltar, on E4 Michael Portillo is Prime Minister, E3 has no oil and E8 is "an ecological wreck with a runaway greenhouse effect".

There are a lot of in-references. Terry Pratchett is explicitly cited, but in real life Hugh Everett was the originator of many-worlds theory, and Tejinder P. Singh is a prominent researcher in the field. Here the unique device which gives access to all possible worlds is called the Infundibulum, the word for a space-warp in *The Sirens of Titan*; Everett's arch-enemy is Charlotte Villiers, sharing her surname with M's assistant in the Bond canon, and her sidekick is called Zaitsev, after the real-life chief planetary scientist of the Soviet space programme. Everett's featured counterpart is Everett M. Singh, not to be confused with Iain M.

Banks, either. The all-devouring Nahn have a lot in common with the nanites of *Stargate SG-1*; and of course E3 has to have airships to go with the steampunk and Tesla's electricity, but the airship's captain is called Anastasia, like Dan Dare's personal transport. When invasion comes, it focuses on London, not Washington, as if in honour of H.G. Wells. On E7 the land bridge between Europe and Britain still stands, as it does in Stephen Baxter's Northland trilogy. Everett M.'s difficulties are very like the android's in *The Last Starfighter*. But the school bullies whom he faces down are Jennings and Derbyshire, inescapably linked in my day to the public school fiction of Anthony Buckeridge; either you loved it or you hated it, and I'm glad to see them parodied at last.

But younger readers may not get these references, or may be amused to catch up with them later. The big idea of this novel is that the world of the *Empress* is the one where the Chicxulub impact never happened, and the dinosaurs' descendants are in charge, with a culture of six 'clades' locked in rivalry and conflict. Yes, there are echoes of Harry Harrison's Eden trilogy... but their 65-million-year lead on us is in physics, not biotechnology, and they've cannibalised the planets of their Solar System to create an Alderson Disc, a filled-in Ringworld like a giant DVD with the sun in the middle (hence the airship crash at the beginning). The sheer scale of the thing, the multiplicity of life it supports and the alienness of rulers who could destroy it for purely personal gain, make the threat that the winners pose to the Earths of the Plenitude truly chilling. For adult readers that may not sit too easily with the in-jokes and the girlfriend problems, but we are not the target audience, who will probably enjoy it all.



NEWS FROM UNKNOWN COUNTRIES

Tim Lees

Amazon Media ebook, 240pp, £3.21

Matthew S. Dent

I'm reliably informed that this is the first self-published book which *Interzone* has reviewed. So no pressure then... Tim Lees is very well known to readers of TTA publications. His short story 'Unknown Cities of America' featured in issue #249 – of the others in the collection, three each appeared in *Interzone* and *Black Static*, and two in *The Third Alternative*. When he sent me the collection, Tim said that he saw e-publishing as the future, and viewed this as a sort of experiment. So at least I'm not the only one sailing boldly into the unknown here.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'Unknown Cities of America' doesn't itself feature in this collection, but thirteen other tales do.

Opening story 'Grumps' starts the collection in exactly the way that a collection of short stories should begin: punchy, creative, and filled to the brim with often-troubling ideas. Narrative-wise, it consists of an inter-dimensional

exploratory mission to meet God, turning into a grotesque theological arms race with a form of life beyond anything imaginable. It takes the classic nature of god philosophising, and twists it with levels of what-if to bring it to a dark conclusion.

'Two Moon City', on the other hand, is a different beast, painting a picture of a colonised Martian landscape which put me in mind of *John Carter of Mars*. The harsh landscape and society is rendered beautifully, and the indulgent world-building is tempered with a gentle plot which leads the reader through. It feels, though, like there is a lot more to tell of this world, if Lees so wished.

'Homeground' is, at first glance, a rather quaint story about aliens visiting a small town. Which it absolutely is. But it captures the realities of such a happening, the way that the weird can simultaneously be humdrum. The interplay of local politics with an alien spacecraft as a visitor attraction rings depressingly true, and the simmering frustration of the main character at the interference of trivia with both life and big picture ideals is understandable. It's an understated story, with a power of its own. Greedy, officious men and women toting easy answers and get-rich-quick schemes would – unfortunately – of course be drawn to an alien landing site.

One of the *Black Static* offerings, 'Cuckoos' was a story I loved when I read its first appearance. Nestled here amongst its siblings, I found I enjoyed it even more. Or perhaps that isn't the right word. Because as with 'Grumps', it's a resonatingly dark story, this time emphasised by its sheer plausibility. A totalitarian regime takes power during a possibly alien incursion, only to be less than willing to surrender it once the danger has ostensibly

passed. The personalisation of it all will make this story chillingly real to anyone with the slightest knowledge of history.

Continuing on what seems like a fascination with odd alien arrivals, 'The Corner of the Circle' envisions a world where extra-terrestrials are an established – if mysterious – part of life. It is a growing-up story, focused on the main character's encounters with an eccentric aunt, who claims to be pregnant by her alien lover. As with some of the other stories in the collection, it does an excellent job of putting the absurd next to the everyday, and this story is pregnant with meaning – no pun intended. We see a part of the main character's story, with events and motives hinted at, but the focus all the while remains on the oddity of the aunt. As much as anything, it is a masterful demonstration of storytelling.

The final story, 'From the House Committee', takes us to an alternate 1950s, with a world beset by monsters and Bobby Kennedy (along with Joe, Jack, and even Tricky Dicky) the only hope. Or maybe not; maybe God is simply winding down to die, and the world with it. It seeps with culture and mystery, and the yawning maw of complete lack of understanding.

Lees is an excellent writer, and these stories stand testament to that talent. It is easy to delve into the fantastical, the endlessly odd. What makes it all the more moving, all the more relevant, is for a story to keep a foot firmly planted in reality. If those fantastical elements have a grounding in the everyday lives of readers, how much more significant it makes them.

Lees moulds ideas and stories together, in a fusion of entertainment and speculation which opens a wider world for the sheer, joyous fun of it.



THE BLACK DOG EATS THE CITY

Chris Kelso

Omnium Gatherum pb, 156pp, \$12.99

Jim Steel

Happy birthday, Interzone. One hundred years old, eh? You're looking good.

Of course, lonesome cowboy Bill Burroughs didn't get around to publishing much until he hit middle age, which puts Chris Kelso way ahead of him in that respect at least. Kelso's Ersatz is a city that uses the same architects as Interzone. The exact location is unclear but it has a mid-Atlantic twang that will be familiar to those of us who grew up with Mega City 3. Other antecedents include Disch's *334* and some of the darker alleyways of John Shirley. We are not looking at Utopia.

Kelso is an exponent of Bizarro fiction, a sub-genre that behaves exactly as you would expect from its name. He's more restrained than some of its practitioners and is a finer writer than most of them, although this will tell you little if you are new to it. It's a zestful, taboo-baiting genre, with a swagger that hasn't been seen since the high noon of cyberpunk, and one suspects that

any commercial appreciation it acquires will be the ruin of it. However, the better writers will survive it and many will move beyond it.

The Black Dog of the title is a crushing contagion that goes far beyond the usual forms of depression. It is so bleak that it drives the sufferers mad. This also means that the Black Dog can become a real demon in this non-subjective world. Some characters, Kricfalusi and the rapist-dentist Baby Guts for example, flee, while others, such as Lester Proctor, search for a cure. Still others try and quarantine themselves in the spaceship-like Hollow Earth. Most, as people do, carry on their lives as best they can. They search for sex, confusing it with love, and put up with unspeakable degradations in the office. However, a dark humour is never far from the surface, deflecting any thoughts of torture porn which is an accusation that can be thrown fairly at several practitioners of Bizarro. A droid/clone goes in search of an identical clone with little more in the way of expectation than the hope of avoiding rejection this time. He finds his clone. They are not physically compatible. Perhaps power tools can help.

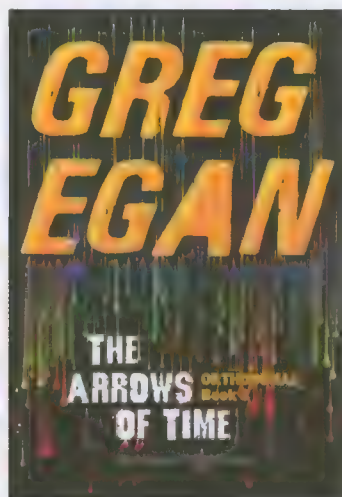
Characters find time to discuss the short stories of Philip K. Dick and feminist readings of the *Alien* trilogy. It's a strange setting for Socratic dialogue, but there is validity in some of the arguments. Some of the characters, such as Fairfax the writer, are fully-rounded creations and reveal much more of the human condition than some of the one-dimension monsters that the reader also meets in the course of the book. As you are probably starting to gather, Kelso covers a lot of ground in this short novel. He also experiments with style. Modernism, poetry, script

writing, graphic novelty, different column layouts; they all get a shot on the page. To Kelso's credit, it generally works; although some of the dialogue is clunky, he rarely overwrites. However, there is no textual need for this. Form and content remain disconnected. It's a bit like being handed a silver spoon with your glass of wine: very pretty, but why?

As the novel progresses, the passages start to stretch and this allows the reader to catch his breath. This also suggests an approach to outlining a novel that, if one is being generous, one might say leaned towards spontaneity. But it is certainly structured and plotted – by way of contrast, Burroughs, much of the time, relied merely on pyrotechnics to push us through the pages. Postmodernism also appears when the Mainstream enters as a villain – much more dangerous than the demon Black Dog, of course. Welcome back, Po-Mo – we've missed you!

The Black Dog Eats The City is a fast and easy read, despite any impression to the contrary that I may have given. There are certainly some rough edges, but not too many. It's great fun. Kelso is committed to his craft and has already had several books published. Stylistically he resembles, at times, a rawer Hal Duncan (the pair of them have already collaborated on an anthology, although Kelso is showing signs of being the more prolific of the two). He will keep on getting better and someday soon people are going to be naming him as one of their own influences. He's worth checking out.

Other books by Chris Kelso received: *A Message From the Slave State* (Western Legends pb, 132pp, £5.60); *Transmatic* (Morbiditybooks pb, 106pp, \$8); *Caledonia Dreamin'*, edited with Hal Duncan (Eibonvale pb, 270pp, £9.50)



THE ARROWS OF TIME

Greg Egan

Gollancz tpb, 432pp, £12.99

John Howard

The Arrows of Time is the third book of *Orthogonal*, following on from *The Clockwork Rocket* and *The Eternal Flame*. *Orthogonal* is a three-volume novel rather than a trilogy. Egan created a radically different sort of universe, going out of his way not to anthropomorphise these particular inhabitants beyond the demands of authorial communication with readers: the demands of fiction written by a human for other humans having to use their words to express and describe what would go on in any universe. Egan takes his creations for granted, and gives matter-of-fact aids and hooks upon which to hang what has to be. For example, they hum and chirp and buzz, have 'rear vision', and can rearrange their bodies to a considerable extent. Reproduction and family life, too, are suitably 'alien' (to us) yet of course natural (for them). They are not unalterable. Part of the ongoing conflict is over whether the advances really are advances or, instead, are causing the removal of another chunk from

the foundations of institutions that have served society well, even if at a great cost to individuals.

In the beginning the home world was coming under increasing threat from Hurlters – meteors that would probably, in due course, destroy the planet before science had advanced far enough for a solution to be discovered. Rather than merely wait, it was decided to construct a generation spaceship, *Peerless* (actually a whole mountain, tunnelled-out and adapted). This spaceship would be sent on a voyage of development, thus creating enough time for a solution to be found and brought back home – all within the lifetimes of the population at home, and hopefully long before any catastrophe.

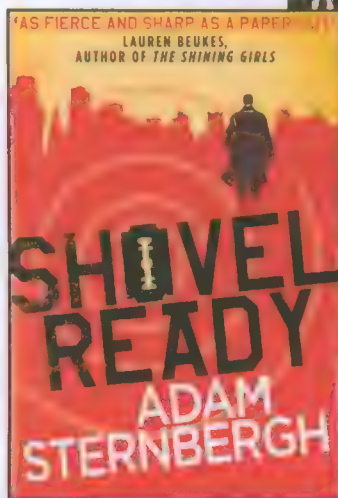
This is possible because Egan's universe plays to different rules. The *Orthogonal* universe follows laws based on the work of Georg Bernhard Riemann (1826–66). Egan invaluablely explains the setup and implications on his website (gregegan.net). In a Riemannian universe "all the dimensions are treated as fundamentally the same. In contrast, in the Lorentzian *space-time* of our own universe, one of the dimensions, *time*, is singled out for special treatment." This means light has no constant speed (so stars are seen as streaks rather than points). The properties of ordinary matter can be traumatic. Time need not only run in one direction: its arrows can fly in from the future as well as out of the past. And for a generation starship travelling at sufficient speed, time will pass at a much faster rate on board than outside (put that copy of *Tau Zero* back on the shelf: it's not wanted on this voyage).

When *The Arrows of Time* opens, several generations have come and gone on *Peerless*. Numerous problems have been solved – not only technological ones, but biological as well. What amounts to a new society has

grown up in space, separated from the home planet. Now, with *Peerless* about to return home laden with advances in technology and knowledge – wisdom too? – it turns out that its problems are far from over.

It is said that science fiction isn't really about the future, but its contextual present. So... *Orthogonal* seeks to portray a race developing science and social structures as it seeks solutions to new challenges, and as it continually attempts to comprehend the universe and its place in it. Paradigms are discovered, superseded, reconstructed. Whatever rules the universe follows, the ways to grow in understanding and maturity – everything for a race becoming, in the lo-o-o-o-o-ng view, what Olaf Stapledon described as "awakened" – there are always setbacks to face from the established ways of thinking and of living, from older societal mores and biological impulses, from the considerations and compromises of power and those wielding it. Here they are.

Egan weaves a rich fabric out of true (science) fiction's strong threads, rolling it out with deceptive ease and with a weight to it that this reader strained with but wouldn't have any other way. *Gold* is like that. What Egan has done is to indulge in a thought experiment that seeks to out-think the thought experiment, bursting out of the idea, letting us see and feel. All right, not *fully* possible: different, different! Why, then, go even that far and spend the time, and make the effort, with these beings, these situations, indeed whole cosmos? Perhaps the reason is simply because Egan can, that it's part of the desire and enthusiasm for moving towards maturity, seeing in Others some amount of Us. Greg Egan has written about people (word intended) worthy of our respect. It is all something to reach out for.



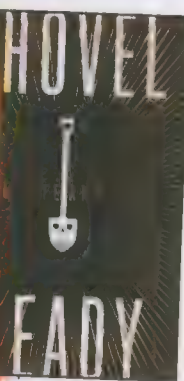
SHOVEL READY
Adam Sternbergh

Headline tpb, 256pp, £13.99

Barbara Melville

Set in a near-future New York, *Shovel Ready* follows the gruff monologue of a garbage man turned killer for hire. Spademan – we need not concern ourselves with his real name – makes his policies on his profession clear from the get go: “I don’t want to know your reasons. [...] I don’t care. Think of me as a bullet. Just point.” Of course, it isn’t that simple. When hired to kill Persephone, the daughter of a powerful evangelist, Spademan finds a grey area in his rulebook, switching his role from assailant to protector. With Persephone in tow, Spademan unravels a disturbing mystery spanning two worlds: a withering post-terrorist New York, and a fake, but tempting, simulation.

This is a story rich in dark ideas and themes. The real New York, the result of several bombings, offers a poor and bedraggled existence. The simulation offers wish fulfilment but at a cost: only the richest of the rich can indulge. The story switches between wasteland and fantasy, exploring



the economic dichotomy alongside themes of temptation, religion, and greed. In fact, pretty much all of the seven deadly sins are in this story (and probably a dozen more). Spademan, who suffered a great loss in the terrorist attacks, is the perfect person to narrate. His job as an assassin allows him an intimate knowledge of New York: those nooks, crannies and underworlds only well-worn and wise observers get to see.

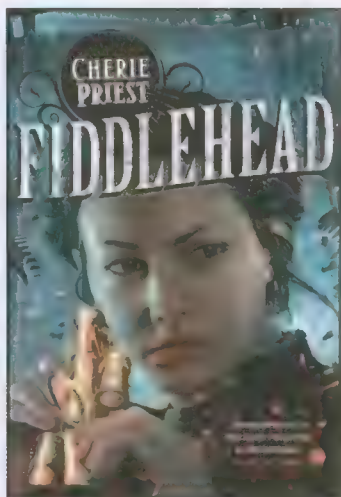
I liked Spademan and his story immediately. His language is acerbic, funny and believable, with fragmented sentences mimicking real speech. Dialogue is heavy throughout, which would usually annoy me, but every word of it shows character – the fact it also moves the plot along is a bonus. The dialogue is reported without the distraction of speech marks – a great way of showing unreliable narration, and something I wish more authors would consider. There’re also very few speech verbs, i.e. he says and she says, but it is always clear who is speaking. Each character has their nuances, ticks and ways with words, even when seen through Spademan’s eyes.

Another high point is the book’s ability to bend genre, something which is deeply ingrained in the narrative. I spotted the echoes of likely influences: William Gibson, Warren Ellis, Cormac McCarthy and Philip K. Dick, to name but a few. Fortunately this makes for an interesting study rather than an ongoing distraction. *Shovel Ready* could drive bookshop owners spare with its many categories: it is science fiction, it is dystopian fiction, it is a thriller, it is detective

fiction and it is noir. Given the simulation theme, it also bumps shoulders with cyberpunk. Now usually my encounters with cyberpunk – or anything in the cyberpunk family – make me want to bludgeon myself unconscious and give up on reading forever. But here it’s light and accessible – so if you hate cyberpunk too, fear not! It’s safe to proceed.

Despite the book’s strong dialogue and perfect dusting of cyberpunk, I still went looking for trouble. When I finished the book, something was nagging: character. This is a plot-driven story – and that works. Books don’t have to be character driven, and dare I say it, characters don’t even have to change. But I felt Spademan was built up to develop early on, and this didn’t quite pay off. He isn’t a straightforward psychopath and does explore difficult emotional setbacks, but when I got to the end I wasn’t sure where he stood with them. This needn’t have been mawkish or layered on thick, but I feel leaving too many open doors belittles the story somewhat. His reason for narrating becomes more about spinning a grisly yarn and less about sharing something both intimate and compelling.

Anyway, rumour has it Sternbergh is working on a second Spademan novel. I’m not sure how this could work, but I’m looking forward to finding out. Perhaps the next story will develop Spademan’s character, or clarify why this shouldn’t happen. Either way, for a book that mentions garbage so much, *Shovel Ready* is a breath of fresh air. It’s great to see writers and publishers taking risks and challenging the typical shelf marks of genre. But perhaps the most impressive thing about this story is how it combines old and new ideas about reality, blending them to make something seamless and original. For a tale about good and evil, this is quite a feat.



FIDDLEHEAD

Cherie Priest

Tor pb, 400pp, £7.99

Elaine Gallagher

Fiddlehead is an adventure yarn set in Cherie Priest's steampunk background of the Clockwork Century. The American Civil War has been toiling on for twenty years and is at a standstill. Advances of technology in electrical, mechanical and steam applications have changed the face of the nineteenth century, but neither side has a decisive advantage. Unacknowledged by the leaders of either side, a plague from the unincorporated West threatens to overrun the war and devastate both North and South. Meanwhile a conspiracy of hawks and profiteers is set to unleash a horrific new weapon which, although promised to end the conflict, will instead relight it for another generation.

The plot of the novel is in two threads. In the first, inventor Gideon Bardsley has developed an electrical analytical engine, called the Fiddlehead project, which predicts the oncoming plague. He must survive attacks from the forces that are out to suppress his results and, with the aid of ex-president Lincoln, his sponsor,

publicise the danger and persuade the public and politicians to end the war before it is too late. In the other thread, Pinkerton agent Belle Boyd is assigned by the ex-president to gather evidence of the plague and to thwart the war-mongering conspiracy.

The story rocks along with gun-fights and races against time and aerial Zeppelin battles and zombies. Yes, zombies. The plague that threatens both North and South is the walking dead, animated by a compound which seeps as a gas out of a fissure in Seattle. This gas is collected by opportunists and distilled into a drug, the use of which is endemic among the soldiers of both sides of the war. The drug has the unfortunate property of acting in the same way as the gas, only more slowly. Wounded drug-using soldiers are dying in hospitals on both sides of the front, immediately rising to attack the staff and other patients, and passing the contagion on to their victims.

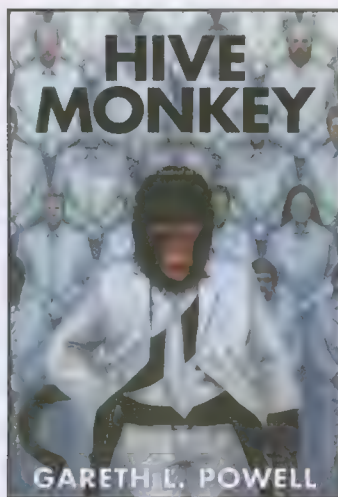
Fiddlehead is, for now, the last in the series. There are some recurring characters; Belle Boyd first appears in the novella 'Clementine', and there are others who show up, acknowledged in the text by people who have heard of them and their previous adventures. While this is a nice continuation for fans of the earlier stories, it does not get in the way of enjoying this one and there is no feeling that one need have read the previous stories.

The Clockwork Century stories are notable for their strong female characters. Belle Boyd is a fascinating character: in her forties, ex-actress, ex-spy and what might be known as an 'adventuress'. At the same time she is at the end of her resources and can't afford a warm coat. Belle's adversary, Katharine Haymes, is forceful, manipulative and sociopathic in exactly the way that a supervillain ought to be. There is also no watering down

of the sexism and racism of the time. The reactions of the characters meeting with Belle range from contempt to patronisation. Haymes must get herself sponsored into meetings of government committees by flattering the Secretary of Defence. Bardsley is easily discredited by his enemies because he is black.

Steampunk stories tend to take liberties with science and technology in the pursuit of their aesthetic; they are much more science-fantasy than science fiction. *Fiddlehead* is quite reasonable in its steampunkery, with hydrogen Zeppelins and petrol-driven vehicles as technology is distributed from the war effort. The computer of the title is a basement full of valves with a huge mechanical printer on another floor for the output. It is not magically intelligent, relying on sufficient data to be input and on its users to correctly interpret the probabilities which it computes as its results. Even the zombies are reasonable, being treated as a plague which is susceptible to analysis. While they are a central conceit of the Clockwork Century stories, they take a back seat to the political machinations and conspiracies which are what this novel is actually about.

I enjoyed this book a lot. For me, the choice of words and phrases and how they evoke the setting are among the most important qualities of a period novel. Choices that are slightly off, or that try too hard, can throw me completely out of a story. Priest's language on the other hand feels completely right for its American Civil War setting and I found *Fiddlehead* and the other Clockwork Century stories to be completely immersive. Worldbuilding details are described from the characters' points of view and only as the characters are affected by them, which again gives a reading experience that keeps up at a good pace.



HIVE MONKEY

Gareth L. Powell

Solaris Books pb, 269pp, £7.99

Ian Hunter

Things couldn't get much worse for American crime writer William Cole, stuck in the UK after the death of the love of his life. He can't hit a deadline to save himself, but he can hit the bottle and the pills without much effort, and he really does need to save himself, or find someone who can, because some ugly-looking characters are out to kill him.

The only way to escape from this mess is to take refuge on the nuclear-powered airship known as the *Tereshkova*, under the captaincy of Amazon-like Victoria Valois. Fortunately the airship is piloted by the most famous primate in the entire world – Ack-Ack Macaque, the gun-toting, cigar-smoking, Spitfire-flying hero of Powell's previous novel, the eponymous *Ack-Ack Macaque*. (You don't necessarily have to have read that one before *Hive Monkey*, but you are missing out on a whole load of fun if you haven't.) Cole might think he's on safer territory now he is up in the air; however, someone turns up, mortally wounded, to warn

him about how bad things really are, and that dying person is Cole himself.

Yes, the world might have been saved from nuclear Armageddon in the first book – but that leaves it nice and ripe for an invading force from an alternative reality that has been cutting swathes through the dimensions and subjugating all it encounters. It wants to make us join with the hive-mind, regardless of whether or not we are willing, and it has the nanotechnology to ensure it happens anyway. Cole, with his imagination and creativity and writing prowess, is an anchor point for these alternative realities and he has to be controlled, or killed – whatever is easiest. Despite his self-pity and self-loathing, the prospect that his wife didn't die in another world and is still out there – somewhere – gives him a reason to live.

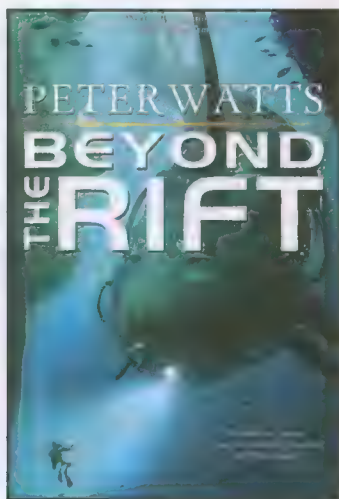
Set in the mid twenty-first century, this novel takes place in an alternative reality which has its origins in the 1950s when France and Britain united out of necessity, with the Queen becoming the head of the French state, creating a European superpower to rival the United States and Russia.

In this slightly steampunkish world, Ack-Ack is a convincing character, full of rage and self-doubt. Uplifted from a computer game and made into a real-life walking, talking monkey, he is truly alone, and out of place in a world of humans despite the fact that he is much sought-after for his celebrity status by both the media and by members of the mysterious cult, or religion, known as the Gestalt who want to give him the chance to combine with them and never be alone again. However, Ack-Ack has chosen to hide on the airship and stay with those few people he knows and loves, such as Valois and the precocious,

computer hacker, and hard-nosed Glaswegian teenager, K8 – not to mention Valois' deceased husband Paul, whose consciousness has been downloaded into the airship's computers until he finds a nifty way to get around as a mobile hologram with a constantly changing, if weird, wardrobe.

Hive Monkey is a highly enjoyable romp with page-turning action spread over forty chapters and has an enjoyable penchant for the surprising narrative twist due to the monkey being in charge, or thinking he is, and the narrative nicely fuses several sub-genres together. Think that the cover gives the game away? Well, almost – and when you are in the company of Ack-Ack Macaque you can always expect him to do the unexpected, no matter how badly the odds are stacked against him. My only quibble with the plot would be the times when we concentrate on a lead character for a couple of introspective chapters that tend to go over old ground as Ack-Ack thinks about how much K8 means to him, and vice versa. However, that minor quibble is more than compensated by the delightful interruptions to the action as we get various "Breaking News" updates from a variety of sources (including good old-fashioned blogs), each one generally giving us the option to "Read More" or "Like", "Comment", or "Share". Following these news bursts are little headlines from related stories that have to do with the economy, or world affairs, or sport, or which animal has been declared extinct, or, crucially, when the next royal wedding will be.

No spoilers here, but the last four lines of the book probably diminish any prospect of a sequel – which is a shame, really, as the monkey and I were just getting started. File under: More. Monkey. Magic.



BEYOND THE RIFT

Peter Watts

Tachyon pb, 240pp, £12.50

Jo L. Walton

Thirteen very gripping stories – *sometimes gripping with uncomfortable vigour* – including a generous helping of near-future thought experiments about neuroscience, consciousness and identity ('The Eyes of God,' 'Hillcrest v. Velikovsky,' 'Mayfly,' etc.). 'The Things,' a fanfic of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, might also be lurking in that camp. It's 'told from the point-of-view of the alien,' though the story plays pretty violently with the notion of point-of-view.

Watts chooses a religious term – 'communion' – to describe the way the Thing's singular self synchs with its various offshoots. Religion gradually emerges as the collection's most pervasive preoccupation, rearing its ugly Godhead in some surprising places, like 'The Things,' but also built into central conceits of several stories. For instance, there's the alternate history 'A Word for Heathens,' one of the collection's highlights, even if its neuroscience feels a bit dated: Koren and Persinger's solenoid-based 'God helmet' started sprouting question-mark antlers shortly

after the story's publication.

Two longer, fairly God-free adventures form the collection's real backbone. 'The Island' is about a cyborg starship crew on a golemesque interminable assignment, roused from cryo by their dodgy TomTom to confront an anomalous megastructure, whilst unintelligible posthuman peril teems in the mouths of wormholes in their wake. Watts traces the outlines of these venerable space opera tropes with a peremptory, almost contemptuous deftness, then fills the rest of his canvas with emergent weirdness of peculiar raw intensity. 'A Niche' is a tense, moreish tale of deep sea geothermal engineers under a lot of pressure at work.

In the brutal, relentless, dystopian afterword, we join Watts as he Googles himself, resists his caricature as a miserabilist, reflects critically on his writing and finally positions himself as "an angry optimist". Despite the spiky and declamatory tone, you never get that sense of 'like it or lump it' which is so common when authors explore their own weaknesses.

Whilst Watts is an insightful critic (or troll) of his own work, he is also a rather sly one. Watts characterises 'Nimbus' as "pure unresearched brain fart", a typically sharp *précis* – insofar as the story imagines vast, gaseous sentience emerging in the firmament of the near future, posing the provocative question: *what if our planet could fart brains?* – but also disingenuous. Humanity's massacre by the wrathful-deity-cum-planetary-immune-response is the background, and Watts knows he could have plastered the foreground with feelgood. Instead he's gone for the one about the daughter who is more-or-less indifferent to her dad's likely suicide. Ecological catastrophe swells the generation gap into a gulf no schmaltz will traverse.

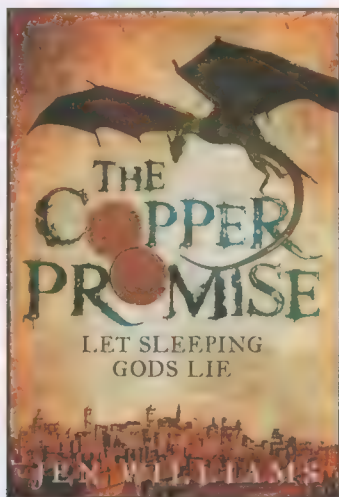
By the time the afterword

is referring to the traumatised cyborgs of 'A Niche' as "mermaids", I *know* Watts has his lung firmly in his cheek and a bioluminescent photophore lure twinkling in his eye. Many readers who call Watts' work 'dark' probably do so for reasons different to those the afterword addresses.

First, there's the enthusiasm for scientific reduction of aspects of stuff which – perhaps because it's intrinsically resilient to existing scientific ways of knowing, or because the stakes on a botched scientific account are so high, or because there's some pragmatic value in occasionally *treating* it as scientifically inexplicable – should maybe be treated gingerly, tenderly, with a bit more negative capability. All that's hardwired into *me* is an alarm bell which trills when I see the word 'hardwired'.

Second, there's rhetoric: Watts often relies on visceral, corporeal and violent connotations to manage the ebb and flow of his prose energy. The first page describes the "half-finished lifeboat cannibalized from the viscera of dead helicopters". Sometimes it's sexual violence – from 'The Second Coming of Jasmine Fitzgerald': "The wound swallows the coroner's rubberised hands like some huge torn vagina, its labia clotted and crystallised".

We all live our lives through approximations – scientific, humanistic, other – and often what prioritises certain models at a certain moment is simply *tact*. Or else, it's deliberate *anti-tact*. It's the late *timor mortis conturbat me* of the gothic, whose object is to discomfit, disquiet, to stir up a dread-like awe. *Sometimes* Watts with his moralist, scientist or philosopher hat on will collaborate with Watts with his gothic or horror or thriller hat on. Tit-for-tat, Watts hats! But just as frequently, their interests collide. Then they're hardwired to *fight*. And I have the model to prove it.



THE COPPER PROMISE

Jen Williams

Headline hb, 538pp, £14.99

Jack Deighton

The Citadel contains within its labyrinthine caverns not only the trapped remains of the old gods (bar one) but a supposed treasure trove. By reputation no-one escapes from it alive yet it still attracts adventurers and has guards who must be bribed to allow entry. Sell-swords Wydrin of Crosshaven (the Copper Cat) and Sebastian Carverson, disgraced former Knight of Ynsmouth, are engaged by the mutilated Lord Aaron Frith of Blackwood to penetrate its secrets. They agree somewhat offhandedly considering the apparent dangers. Amid adventures which in part are curiously reminiscent of the 1980s children's adventure game TV show *Nightmare* and *Indiana Jones* films they succeed up to a point. Sebastian suffers a mortal wound but Frith is restored to fitness – and beyond – by immersing himself in the lake underneath the Citadel. In the process Frith acquires magical powers by which he involuntarily transports our three heroes to Blackwood in an instant when

they are threatened by the old god Y'ruen, a dragon, which their foray into the Citadel has raised from its confinement. Frith's new powers allow him to heal the wounds of both Sebastian and Wydrin.

In the Blackwood village of Pinehold, they encounter the source of Frith's misfortunes, Fane, who is torturing the inhabitants to find the secret of the Frith family vault. While wearing a peculiar glowing helmet – which channels the influence of the demon Bezcavar, the Prince of Wounds, an enthusiastic harvester of pain – Fane is immune from harm. His equally cruel henchmen, the Children of the Fog, Enri and Roki, wear enchanted gauntlets to manifest copies of themselves which confuse and confound any opponents. With help from an old woman, Holley, and her magical glass spheres, our heroes escape, cross an invisible bridge to the vault, find in it little but maps and return to free Pinehold from its oppressors. Meantime Y'ruen and her indistinguishable brood army – whose members have numbers but no names (though some of them have developed an interest in words and their own individuality) – is devastating the land of Relios.

The three then split up to pursue their own projects before being reunited for the final scenes. Wydrin returns to Crosshaven, Sebastian goes to fight the brood army. On the Hollow Isle of Whittenfarne, Frith meets Jolnir, who turns out to be O'rin, the untrapped god, and, without much protest or questioning, bestows on Frith the power to control his magic. As a by-product Frith realises that the maps describe a weapon.

This is Williams' first novel and I'm afraid that shows. We start with a torture scene – never auspicious – from the viewpoint of a character who is not even

mentioned again for about a hundred pages and is encountered in the narrative just once more – and that after she has already been killed. Chapter two introduces the Citadel and some of its menaces. Sebastian's erstwhile friend Gallo is killed. Only in chapter three do we meet our heroes, the two sell-swords, in a tavern, awaiting their client, the tortured party from chapter one, Aaron Frith, whose escape from torture is dealt with exceedingly sketchily. (Not quite 'with one bound he was free', but near enough.) Descriptions of fights are leaden, we have changes of viewpoint within scenes, suggestions by a character of what to do next are followed by the sentence, "And so they did". At various points a touch of economy with the prose would not have gone amiss. For example, who else would a cluster of people be in proximity to but each other?

There is also a curious prudishness to the proceedings. None of the characters really swears. (Williams tells us they do but no expletives save two "bloody"s appear in direct speech.) They might as well be neuter for all the sexuality we are shown. The one time even the faintest possibility of sex arises the subject is treated with absurd coyness and the opportunity is snuffed out abruptly. We infer early on, and later are told – but without description – that Sebastian is gay. Wydrin, I suspect, is intended to be a spiky young woman but instead appears rather foolhardy and unreasonably cocky. All are hauled hither and yon by the necessities of the plot. Gallo's reappearance as one of the walking dead is a case in point. None of them come across as having agency of their own.

For all these reasons *The Copper Promise* fails to breathe. There is no sense in it of a life beyond the page, and little but death on it.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

6.

Not a Series of Waves, but an Ocean

Back in 1998, the author Jonathan Lethem wrote an essay entitled 'Close Encounters: The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction'. About as incendiary as you'd expect from a long-time genre fan settling in to a career as a mainstream novelist, Lethem's essay describes 1973's Nebula Awards as a landmark moment in the history of science fiction.

Perhaps the most prominent cultural narrative of mid-20th Century science fiction is that of ever-increasing literary sophistication: From Burroughs to Bester and on through Ballard, Delany and Disch, science fiction was moving away from the simple-minded pulps and embracing complex characters, progressive politics and a modernist approach to prose style. Now associated with the British and American iterations of the New Wave, this movement towards greater literary sophistication earned the field a good deal of attention from literary journalists and academics but it did not enjoy universal support. Stuck in the past of whichever present you happen to name, the Hugo Awards largely ignored the New Wave but the real setback came in 1973 when the Science Fiction Writers of America gave the Nebula Award for best novel to Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous*

with *Rama* rather than Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Jonathan Lethem describes the 1973 Nebula Awards as "a tombstone marking the death of the hope that science fiction was about to merge with the mainstream" but a better way of looking at it would be to see it as the moment when the New Wave finally broke and rolled back down the beach.

As frustrating as the 1973 Nebula Awards must have been for people heavily invested in bringing down the ghetto walls and merging with mainstream literary culture, the collapse of the New Wave simply marked the end of a single cycle in a much broader cultural system. Just as the collapse of the pulps cleared the decks for a new generation of writers with a new set of goals, the collapse of the New Wave created a cultural vortex that sucked in a number of female writers, fed on the energies of second wave feminism and created the swell that would later come to be known as Feminist SF. Indeed, the reason people keep talking about the death of science fiction is that the genre is forever moving between a state of collapse and a state of renewal. Each breaking wave starts the process again and, as much as we may cheer, denounce and agitate, there is really no telling which set of cul-



tural energies the next wave will draw from. Like the scientists in Asimov's 'Nightfall', we know that the end is coming and we know that something will eventually emerge on the other side but we are separated from that future by a wall of darkness, a tyrannical now.

The big movements and trends may draw the eye but the field of science fiction is actually far more diverse than simple historical narratives might suggest. For every great cultural wave there are a hundred tiny eddies that never quite crest but whose cultural energies still contribute to the rise and fall of the cultural ocean. In 2002, Geoff Ryman's Clarion workshop issued a statement forswearing the use of scientifically implausible technologies in their fiction but while Mundane SF never caught on as a movement, its principles live on in the fact that FTL seems to have joined ESP as one of those tropes whose presence in a story signals a more nostalgic or fantastical bent. Between 2002 and 2005, Charles Stross worked on a series of stories that tried to rejuvenate Golden Age narratives by shifting their focus away from physics and engineering and towards a more 21st Century engagement with computer science and economics. The resulting fix-up novel

Accelerando may have secured a Hugo nomination but rather than inspiring a new approach to hard SF, the stories actually accelerated the evaporation of genre boundaries and the collapse of traditional science fiction by providing Hard SF credentials to a great tide of post-Singularity fantasy stories. While both of these moments contributed to the evolution of the field, neither acquired sufficient energy or momentum to change the face of science fiction. Every innovative story is an eddy and every eddy is a Jonbar point at which the history of science fiction goes one way when it could just as easily go another. What might have happened if hard SF had been reborn with an interest in economics? What might the field look like today if the original New Weird discussions had not been co-opted by people looking for a way to sell postmodern fantasy stories? Thinking about the history of science fiction is not just about reading old books and paying deference to the heroes of generations past, it is also about wondering what might have happened if things had played out differently and yearning for some of those more pregnant possibilities. Jonathan Lethem has his broken wave and you probably have yours.

This one is mine.

The American academic Brian Attebery argues that while stories from the Golden Age of science fiction undeniably drew inspiration from both literary (Poe, Verne, Shelley, Wells) and commercial (Buchan, Hammett, Sabatini) fiction, they also drew from the emerging field of scientific journalism. Many people look at early works of science fiction, see the weird plotting and poorly drawn characters, and take these things as indicators of a lack of artistic maturity. However, a more fruitful way of approaching these early texts is to view them as sto-

ries written to an entirely different set of aesthetic principles. One that is simply no longer in fashion.

In 1950, the French author Alain Robbe-Grillet produced an essay in which he called for the novel to cease its preoccupation with plot, character and action in order to focus upon objects and a depersonalised vision of the world. Robbe-Grillet's argument for this radical departure was that the principles of the modern novel were laid down in the 19th Century by people seeking to cultivate an audience of upper middle-class people who wanted to see their bourgeois ideals legitimised by art. By 1950, the world was said to have changed sufficiently that an entirely new form of novel was required. Robbe-Grillet was undoubtedly correct but what he did not realise is that science fiction was, by that point, selling hundreds of thousands of magazines packed to the brim with stories that tore down the traditional boundary between fiction and non-fiction.

In his own crooked way, Hugo Gernsback was a far more radical literary figure than Alain Robbe-Grillet. Gernsback began his publishing career with a magazine called *Modern Electronics* but despite setting out to cater to the then-trendy hobby of amateur radio, Gernsback treated his audience's interest in electronic communications as a Trojan horse for getting them into the habit of thinking about society and the future in a more systematic way. One of the ways in which he encouraged people to think about the future was to embed those patterns of thought and speculation into what were ostensibly works of fiction. Given Gernsback's enormous influence on pulp science fiction, it is unsurprising that many of science fiction's native techniques (including info-dumps and eyeball kicks) are means of

either directly presenting readers with a scientific concept or forging subtle connections between existing ideas that cast them in entirely new lights. In fact, much of what is now hastily dismissed as 'weak plotting' or 'poor characterisation' is actually a result of using literary techniques to pursue non-literary ends. Moving from magazine to magazine, Gernsback carried with him the idea that the tools of literary and commercial fiction were only a means to a far more interesting end: Equipping his audience with the conceptual tools required to make sense of rapid technological change.

Gernsback's campaign to create a new form of figurative popular non-fiction effectively ended with the collapse of the pulp fiction market at the end of the 1950s. Incapable of supporting themselves, science fiction's remaining professional writers began to adapt their style in order to meet the demands of a publishing industry built around the traditional novel. This shift ended careers, buried reputations and set the stage for the New Wave, but what if the pulps had never collapsed? What if science fiction had nurtured its journalistic influences rather than striving to outgrow them? What if science fiction had devoted itself to explaining and critiquing an increasingly complex world? What if Olaf Stapledon had emerged as a more influential writer than Robert Heinlein? That is a Jonbar point worth thinking about.

If the recent history of the Arthur C. Clarke Award tells us anything it is that Jonathan Lethem was intensely foolish to write-off science fiction's ability to engage with the mainstream. His mistake lay in assuming that once a wave broke its energy would be lost but the New Wave is no more dead than Feminist SF. Science fiction is an ocean made up of a thousand once and future waves.

LASER
FODDER
TONY LEE

FRANKENSTEIN

BANGKOK ASSASSINS

NICK FURY: AGENT OF
S.H.I.E.L.D.

THOR: THE DARK WORLD

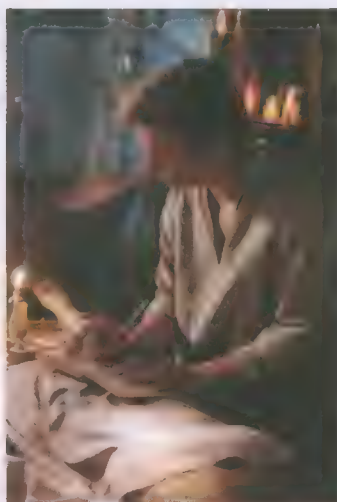
ENDER'S GAME

BILL & TED'S EXCELLENT
ADVENTURETHE HUNGER GAMES:
CATCHING FIRE

THE MACHINE

DOCTOR MORDRID

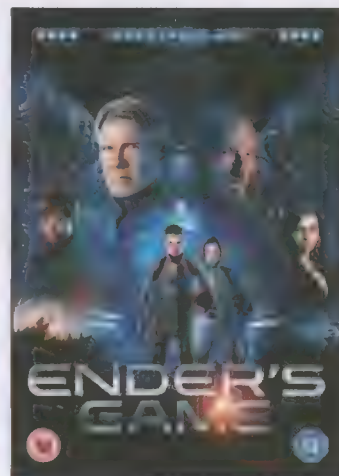
ROBOT WARS



Kevin Connor's TV two-parter **FRANKENSTEIN** (10th anniversary DVD, 13 January) is three hours of handsomely staged costume gothic produced by Hallmark. Donald Sutherland and William Hurt lend this version a heavyweight actorly presence but they are merely supporting players, and it's down to the overacting pair of Alec Newman as Victor and Luke Goss as the creature to carry the rather leisurely paced romanticised narrative from ambitious genius to tragic downfall. With various plotline detours – sometimes copied from or reflecting upon the

concerns of Kenneth Branagh's rather uneven 1994 spectacular – there's beautiful scenery and a stylish use of darkness and shadows along the way from rage/revenge of the miraculous and yet condemned abomination to his creator's frozen grief/misery, as a fairly stodgy visual metaphor of the conflicts between scientific advancement and conventional morality.

As he has proved in the likes of *Blade II*, *Hellboy II* and *Death Race 2*, former boy-band popster Goss is at least competent in action-movie roles. However, when he is directed to portray a horror icon as protean as Frankenstein's monster his abilities lack credibility and sufficient substance. Sadly, despite its depiction of obsession and portrait of 'evil' as a vengeful zombie, the period drama never comes to life. Made in the same year as this, Marcus Nispel's lower-budgeted movie based on Dean Koontz's updated version of *Frankenstein* – starring Parker Posey as a homicide detective hunting down a serial killer in New Orleans – remains far more interesting, and is quite imaginatively twisty in its accomplished recycling of the nightmare story's familiar elements.



Clunky as a sackful of old hammers tumbling down a spiral staircase, and as laboured as that ridiculous simile, **BANGKOK ASSASSINS** (DVD, 24 February) is, amazingly, the fourteenth movie directed by Yuthlert Sippapak, maker of the popular *Rahtree* horror series. In this comedy actioner, an elderly Shaolin master trains blind, deaf and mute orphan teens to fight against equally super-powered magical martial arts villains that are trafficking children into slavery. Corny farce unfolding at a lethargic pace, terribly inept performances and fantasy kung fu scenes with appallingly camp choreography, this is all but unwatchable except for some competent comic book style special effects. Hong Kong's genre filmmakers do this sort of thing so much better, and even Korean standards are far superior. Anyone expecting this movie to match the quality of Tony Jaa's work is very likely to be extremely disappointed in this feeble-minded, ultimately witless Thai export.



While TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* seems unlikely to please many followers of the Marvel movies franchise or satisfy comic book action fans, and a big-screen Nick Fury prequel touted last year has made no progress towards production, it is perfect timing for the long-awaited release of 1998's TV movie **NICK FURY: AGENT OF S.H.I.E.L.D.** (DVD, 27 January). As scripted by David Goyer and directed by Rod Hardy (maker of the 1979 sci-fi vampire horror *Thirst* and the 1997 version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* starring Michael Caine), this triumph or travesty – depending upon your view of David Hasselhoff as the iconic eye-patched super-spy – is a watchable parodic mess but it's probably only admirable if your tolerance for campy posturing is high without a faculty scrambling alcoholic boost. In Marvel's rapidly expanding

cinema franchise, the Fury gig practically saved Samuel Jackson's fading career. As for the Hoff... well, let's list his qualifications and professional skills, and itemise his suitability for playing the ultimate spook:

1. He's tall
2. ?

The bluffer has no screen presence. Zero gravitas. He can't be bantered with in any mode of acting except panto farce. Hasselhoff's take on a favourite comics hero as tough guy is so boring that even vampire-styled villainess Viper doesn't care for a chat when Fury is easily captured by her big henchmen. There is a heli-carrier (of a sort), a stunt/gag with an exploding eyeball, and Lisa Rinna (*Robot Wars*) traipsing about in tight leather, although she's not even a placeholder for Scarlett Johansson's excellent Black Widow. Overall, then, were it not for the terrorist activities of HYDRA (this is a first live-action appearance for their organisation), this TV flick would have precious little to commend it to new Marvel fans eager to follow such canonical productions. I don't think this offers half of the shamelessly amusing fun that Albert Pyun's *Captain America* (1990) delivers.



Cosmic fantasy of a Lovecraftian order, **THOR: THE DARK WORLD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 February) is a majestic combination of imagery from the seeming polar-opposite duo of genre giants *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* that works wonders because of its appealing characters and strong, updated mythology. A splendid yarn of humans and gods versus monsters, this is a mighty effort of Marvel adaptation light years beyond that of Kenneth Branagh's *Thor*. Ancient enemies from one of the 'heims threaten the many worlds beneath Asgard and above the Earth, as all trans-dimensional sky-roads converge upon Greenwich. Scientific interpretations of magic have rarely been this concisely engaging, and there is a fuzzy logic to the romance between heroic physicist Jane and the Odinson that holds an over-worked imploding-universe plot in the gentle hands of destiny with an impressive visionary aspect. We are privileged to be living in the golden age of superhero movies.



Gavin Hood's adaptation of Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel, **ENDER'S GAME** (Blu-ray/DVD, 10 March) delivers a tolerably po-faced epic of military sci-fi, which plays like a *Starship Troopers* sanitised for teen gamers meets Nick Castle's *The Last Starfighter* (1984), by way of some *Harry Potter*-ish battle school mentoring for young hero (Asa Butterfield, talented star of *Hugo*). Before setting aside the arguments of provenance, over what nowadays seems a fairly routine space opera idea, it's worth pausing just to consider that Castle's early-CGI adventure movie predated the publication – although, according to wiki notes, it was previously available online – of Card's series-launching book (a Nebula winner in 1986) by a year. Perhaps the very idea of a computer gamer interacting with the machineries of Big War was something that was just in the SF air following John Badham's popular movie *WarGames* (1983)?

Anyway, here's a coming-of-age tale of prodigy Ender surviving all the bullying trials of spacers' boot camp (like a *Boy's Own* take on *Full Metal Jacket*) that prime our boy genius for exploitation by nefarious warmongers, ultimately to be an unwitting instrument of planetary xenocide. Butterfield is very good in the leading role and his often mesmerising performance eclipses those of his adult co-stars, with Harrison Ford's gruff recruiter in particular failing to rise above the characteristics of a TV cliché. Never mind the human drama, zero-gravity tactical games should amuse, and the inevitable climactic space battle is actually quite impressive in its vast scales of hardware, despite being entirely virtual from the heroes' POV.



"I'm here to help you with your history report" explains Rufus (George Carlin), surely the coolest time-traveller ever seen, at the Zen starting point of comedy **BILL & TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE** (25th anniversary Blu-ray steelbook, 17 March). Doctor Who never had phone box companions like these. This raucous joke-fest is basically *Time Bandits* with American teens. The clueless Californian pals' world tour picks up Billy the Kid, Socrates, Napoleon, Freud, Beethoven, Joan of Arc, Genghis Khan and Abe Lincoln to help with homework. An inconsistently amusing story of innocents abroad – in eras beyond their understanding – this is too dependent on the knowing appeal of Bill and Ted's ignorance. But, in a twist that might impress *Back to the Future's* Doc Brown, they suss out a bootstrap timeline paradox to enable a jailbreak and climactic high school presentation, and indulge in self-congratulatory sitcom routines along the way. Yes, way. "Why would we lie to ourselves?" It's a fun movie, right? In between all the clowning skits, sight gags and commentary on late-1980s US pop culture, there is also time for a few salient points about literacy, education and self-determination.



Directed by Francis Lawrence (maker of the great *Constantine*, and weakling remake *I Am Legend*), **THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 17 March) has plenty of strong development after a disappointing launch. Although it maintains the basic silliness – necessary for cinema series continuity – of a dystopian scenario that's long since lapsed into a ready blueprint for sci-fi parody (cf. *Idiocracy*), its feudalism is stocked with appallingly unsympathetic noncombatant antagonists, presented not as po-faced meritocracy satire but as futuristic drama of political hypocrisy, intended as a morality lesson for teeny viewers.

This sequel repeats the plodding sentimentalism of the first movie, as it starts with a victory tour for coal-miner's daughter-on-fire Katniss (a terribly over-praised Jennifer Lawrence) and baker's boy Peeta (Josh Hutcherson,

remakes of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *Red Dawn*) who find themselves lauded as figureheads of impending revolt, with three-fingered salutes all round. Amidst corrupt decadence of Capitol parties celebrating the PR charm of these 'lethal lovers', backstage plotting exposes game-cheats as the whole of the game, before and after all the arena killings.

President Snow (Donald Sutherland, still doing his 'a boiled egg for breakfast' shtick) orders Orwellian boots to descend on rebels in the districts of utmost poverty. The storyline soon contorts with themes of our heroine as either lioness underfoot or fighting lamb, but redrafted huntress Katniss finds that champion spirit is harder to channel here than it was for more radical genre-actioner competitors (*Battle Royale*, especially).

The 75th games and a neo-Nazi quell under martial brutality eventually sparks warrior feats from Kat – bride of showbiz death (still very chummy with her stylist, if not her drunken mentor) – upsetting the theatricality of a conceptualised gladiatorial galumphiad. Alliances and betrayals are stage-managed hostilities in the tournament environment. The main event commences with lasers in a jungle somewhere, under a dome where toxic fog and mandrills make any rest, let alone sleep, impossible. And if knowing honest identikit enemies from untrustworthy friends becomes more difficult as the hours of play tick by, at least Amanda Plummer is on hand to do her unnerving crackpot act to good effect when she helps figure out how to predict the danger room systems of this *Truman Show* variant just in time for the myth-building cliff-hanger.

Trilogy closer *Mockingjay* comes in a two-part adaptation (again directed by Lawrence) released this year and next.



British robot movie **THE MACHINE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 31 March) is written and directed by one Caradog James, and considers the results of an arms race based upon artificial intelligence while Europe is locked a 'cold war' against China. Chief scientist Vincent (Toby Stephens, *Severance*, *Dark Corners*) runs a technology bunker and works on a quantum computer, while providing cyber-implants and bionic limbs for injured military veterans. American specialist Ava (Caity Lotz, Black Canary in TV's *Arrow*) joins the research team, but she does not survive very long in this crudely dystopian world.

Like *Caprica*, it's about the perfect-android Singularity, as the female Machine struggles

to learn about humanity and cope with immature fears. As a runaway robot thriller it's almost ruined by the foolish use of lens flare in a misguided attempt to generate atmosphere in the dingy hardware labs. As a typical home-grown effort, *The Machine* is a woefully underfunded production that showcases all the usual Brit-SF problems – so much like the BBC's current genre output – in that it exhibits a simplistic and almost throwback attitude to its foregrounding of speculative futurism. It is as if sci-fi movie developments of the 1970s (*Westworld*, *Stepford Wives*, *Questor Tapes*) and the rather more sophisticated 1980s (*Blade Runner*, Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Aaron Lipstadt's

Android) never happened, as it rehashes many familiar tropes.

It is much less fun than *Eve of Destruction* (1991) or gynoid blonde *Galaxina* (1980) as the corporatised government bad guys take control of Vincent's project for military prototyping and it becomes a numbingly predictable actioner. Admittedly, there are some competent visual effects, but *The Machine* is sadly lacking fresh ideas. We can easily trace Machine's genre lineage back to Maria in *Metropolis* and Olympia in *Tales of Hoffman*, but such vintage adds nothing to *The Machine*, and the movie's bland synthesiser score weakens it further, making it all sound horribly dated, so that it feels even more like watching an ill-advised remake.

Tony also reviews a great many DVDs and Blu-rays for our sister magazine *Black Static*, some of which we offer in easy to enter competitions. In *Black Static* #39, out now, Tony covers over twenty new and forthcoming releases, including *Vikings Season 1*, *We Are What We Are* remake, *In Fear*, *Memory Lane*, *Outpost III: Rise of the Spetsnaz*, *Cabin Fever 3*, and more, including several titles that will probably be new to you...

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BAND CULT: 88 FILMS

Father and son team Albert and Charles Band ably mimicked Roger Corman's hugely successful approach to low-budget genre pictures. Their combined filmmaking was a mirror of Corman's output from the 1950s to the 2000s, with or without exploitation content, and the Bands' production companies – Empire and Full Moon – were almost perfectly attuned to genre fandom's demands in the era of VHS rental/retail markets. Despite the variable quality of their product, the Bands enjoyed triumphs with the likes *Trancers* and *Re-Animator*, and they regularly mixed sci-fi/fantasy-horror with comic book themes. Whereas Corman was calculating and frequently cynical in tone or satirical with sociopolitical messages, the Bands movie trademarks were just good fun and often endearingly silly amusement. Formed in 2012, British DVD label 88 Films unleashed a growing collection of trashy obscurities (that include *Cannibal Women*, *The Day Time Ended*, *Laserblast* and *Mandroid*) under a rather misapplied 'Grindhouse' banner, alongside a parallel stream of releases beyond that – such as the *Puppet Master* and *Subspecies* series – handpicked from the Empire and Full Moon catalogues.

Continuing the label's run of low-budget fare, their Grindhouse collection adds Charles Band's 1997 comedy-horror *Hideous!* and *The Creeps* (DVDs, 27 January), while the latest batch of unearthed oddities from realms of sci-fi/fantasy are on DVD, 17 February. Although it is basically just a borrowing from Marvel's supreme sorcerer Dr Strange (the comic was first adapted for TV in 1978), Full Moon's 1992 production of **DOCTOR MORDRID** (ref. Mordred from Arthurian myth)



DOCTOR MORDRID

stars Jeffrey Combs as the reclusive immortal magician turned criminal psychologist Anton Mordrid. Delivering a typically sober and measured performance, Combs imbues this comic book material with street credo that Peter Hooten's mystic Stephen Strange never quite managed to achieve in Philip DeGuere's 1978 movie, which relied on colourful renderings of other dimensional realms – reasonably faithful to imagery from the acid-trippy comics – for its cosmic-sorcery conceit.

While in magical conflict against evil alchemist Kabal (Brian Thompson in full-house panto mode), lonely Mordrid befriends neighbour/police consultant Samantha (Yvette Napiir, later promoted to detective in the TV-sanitised *RoboCop* spin-off), and she becomes his confidante and the movie's heroine. During their final confrontation, Kabal and Mordrid animate dinosaur skeletons in a museum and perform light-show theatrics comparable to other magical duels in more recent cinema.

Of somewhat lesser interest, Albert Band's **ROBOT WARS** concerns a futuristic mega-mecha

ROBOT WARS



transport hijacked by bad guys. The huge walking machine of scorpion-like design (as with *Dr Mordrid*'s dinosaurs, stop-motion animation here is by David Allen) tackles a giant humanoid robot in the modest finale. In cheesy nonsense that's wrapped around the special effects, Barbara Crampton plays a scientist caught up in the mayhem, opposite Don Michael Paul who is archly comic as Drake, the 'renegade pilot' of the MEGA-1 robot and this movie's supposed hero, who easily shrugs off the threat of Japanese villainy.

With the current 3D fad showing no sign of fading, and numerous rebranded apocalypses extant, let's hope that 88 Films will delve into the dense fringes of genre popularity and soon release such neglected 1980s movies as *Metalstorm*, *Robot Jox* and Lee Katzin's *World Gone Wild*. Is it too much to expect a DVD release for Pierre-William Glenn's forgotten *Terminus* too?

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

HER

ROBOCOP

A NEW YORK WINTER'S
TALE

I, FRANKENSTEIN

47 RONIN

ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE

MR PEABODY & SHERMAN

THE LEGO MOVIE



Can we love what is not human? Will we? Should we? Must we? In a sense, we already do. Film is all about seducing us into loving the unreal, the dead, the *Maschinenmensch*, using our cognitive overspill to project on to the faces of the stars the illusion of inner life and being, as our hyperactive theory of mind already does for animals, toys, machines, and gods. But a singularity is approaching, where our relationships with imaginary friends outstrip our dwindling power to interact with living minds; where the worlds on our screens become more involving than the lives we inhabit and share, and our repertoire of affect dwindles as we fixate on ever more tailored and appealing simulations.

This is the wise, deep, and melancholic comic business of Spike Jonze's cyber-romance **HER**, which as we go to press has just become only the second science fiction film to win a screenplay Oscar (after *Eternal Sunshine* ten years earlier, though *Return of the King* did score a rather less deserved trophy the previous year). It's an achievement the more extraordinary for what is Jonze's first solo feature-writing credit. After two films and nearly a third with Charlie Kaufman, before the gruelling production on *Where the Wild Things Are* took Jonze out of directing *Synecdoche, New York* and he returned instead to the short subjects that had made his name – particularly 2010's robot romance *I'm Here* with Andrew Garfield, who is thanked along with many other former collaborators here – he's reinvented himself as a complete auteur without breaking the stride

of his utterly unique and coherent body of directorial work.

The premise seems mild enough – unhappy divorcing midlife male falls for his next-generation AI operating system – but from the opening multiple reveal, it's a film that springs piquant twists whenever you find yourself beginning to settle into thinking you know where it's going. Jonze himself has talked the film down as sf and up as a film about relationships, which is certainly a level on which it works with a kind of grown-up wisdom not normally looked for in Hollywood. Nevertheless, if you could imagine everything you could reasonably want in a great terrestrial science fiction film, it would probably look a lot like *Her*. The most powerful and delicious cognitive frisson comes with the discovery that the story we're watching on screen has not been the real story,

which instead was the more lingering and affecting tale of invisible Samantha's own reality, and her meticulously mapped evolution from a coy simulation of mind to a transcendent being beyond consciousness, body, comprehension, and (poignantly) human reach. The near-future scenario, set in a persuasive Shanghai-inflected (and -shot) future LA whose like we haven't seen before, plays inventive changes on its theme of simulated feelings, from the hero's day job as a ghostwriter of intensely affecting computer-handwritten personal letters to the metaphysical dilemmas of Samantha's increasingly disruptive sense or pretence of her own reality and her negotiations with her own body envy.

It is, as well as a brilliantly played and directed film, a brilliantly written one. Every few minutes an idea comes along that you haven't seen before, and Kaufman's tutelage is especially apparent in the scenes of crosstalk between multiple realities, as when the hero tries to interact with a swearsy and attitudinal VR game character while simultaneously carrying on an audio conversation with Samantha in which a third-party e-mail is embedded. Nevertheless, it's tempting to suspect that the film couldn't have ended up as affecting as it has without its necessarily innovative shooting technique (with Samantha's lines recorded live but the actress screened from view) and the radical revision it then enabled in post (where Samantha Morton was replaced with Scarlett Johansson to salvage Jonze's troubled three-hour rough cut). It's a film that nobody else could have made, or written, or imagined, full of strange beauties, sad truths, and sweet mysteries. Who would ever have seen it coming?



ROBOCOP

Alex Murphy has to discover the man inside his own machine in Jose Padilha's unexpectedly smart and resonant remake of **ROBOCOP**, in which the Brazilian incomer brings to his Hollywood debut the same outsider's squint at America that Verhoeven brought to his, but with an appropriately updated geopolitical spin and some unexpectedly deft use of the wife and child that the original film series so casually wrote away (though original writers Michael Miner and Ed Neumeier, still credited here, did reinstate Murphy Jr for the 1993 live-action TV series). The distinctive satirical element that Verhoeven and Neumeier wrought in their collaborations on *RoboCop* and *Starship Troopers* has wisely been judged inimitable, but is homaged by getting Samuel Jackson in for a morning of greenscreen to steal the show as a corporate-shill TV troll: "It is great to see American machines helping to promote peace and freedom abroad ... Some of you may even think that the use of these drones overseas makes us the kind of bullying imperialists that our forefathers were trying to be!" (Bit on-the-hooter there, Sam, but thanks

for stopping by.) Ingenious use is made of veteran rehabilitation narratives and a thumping intertextual evocation of Jake Sully's rebirth, and there's some clever, if ultimately copped-out-of, play with the modern illusion of free will: "Consciousness is nothing more than the processing of information. I can fix him and he won't know the difference." But the sequence that hands-up defines the film is an unflinchingly sustained display of exactly what is left of the organic Alex Murphy, which with any luck will give the PG-13 audience nightmares for life. That's a legacy that any machine could be proud of.

Akiva Goldsman has done a brutal OmniCorp number on *Winter's Tale* in what has now become **A NEW YORK WINTER'S TALE** for the UK, who are apparently at risk of confusing Mark Helprin's fiercely-loved 1983 fantasy doorstep with more locally famous homonyms. It's hard to think of an adaptation that has wrought quite such monstrously Procrustean mutilations on its source. Almost all the limbs and vital organs have been slashed away and replaced by Hollywood clockwork, leaving only the odd



A NEW YORK WINTER'S TALE

face, name, and extremity to gaze out at us from inside a mechanical body which reduces a living organic creation to a clumping thing of clonks and crashes. Like Alex Murphy's hand, a solitary dialogue scene has randomly survived (the first interview between Colin Farrell's heart-burglar Peter and William Hurt's newsprint patriarch), along with a dreadfully distorted version of the romance of Peter Lake and Beverly Penn with a hilariously awkward new ending, and a drastically shrunken finale which entirely inverts the outcome of Peter's final confrontation with Pearly Soames. None of these characters is easily playable, though the very able cast do all they can with what little Goldsman's script has left them to play, which in the case of Jennifer Connelly's Virginia Gamely is nothing at all. Most of the supports seem to be favours called in from Goldsman's past writing gigs (two from *A Beautiful Mind*, one from *Lost in Space*, and that chap from *I, Robot* and *I Am Legend* in a new role so gloriously wrong in conception and execution that it's almost worth seeing the film to have been there).

It would be easy to say that a *Winter's Tale* from the writer of *Batman and Robin* was always going to be a match as blessed as Joel Schumacher's *Lanark* or Michael Bay's *Little, Big*, but I'm actually not sure Goldsman is principally to blame. It's all too

evident that this film has had to be accountable to a system which is populated by people who are congenitally incapable of reading, let alone seeing the point of, 700 pages of überliterary magic realism. The novel is unfilmable not because it's long, literary, prodigal with wonders, and overstates its welcome by a third or so, but because it can't be experienced at second-hand. How would you even pitch it? "A thief on the run from his former boss has a *coup de foudre* with a dying heiress and falls through a timewarp with a magic horse to emerge eighty years later, work a few miracles, and die when a bridge to heaven fails and the city burns and is reborn." That's not really a story in the simple sense that Hollywood understands, nor is it really what most of the book is or is about, which is rather a century-spanning hyperDickensian fantasy of an impossible New York populated by generations of impossible characters in "the season in which time was superconductive". But the pitch is all the executives hear, and so we strangely find ourselves in a film where characters bearing names from the novel are caught up in a cheesy by-numbers plot about demons in the service of Lucifer trying to prevent a pair of lovers from cashing in a miracle, which ends with the character who doesn't die in the book getting killed by the one who does.



I, FRANKENSTEIN

"I may be just a mechanic," says our hero, "but what are we if not machines?" Alex Murphy would have his own answer to that one.

Pretty much the same plot reappears from another screenwriter-turned-director stuffing a classic text up the crack of a Valentine's turkey in Stuart Beattie's **I, FRANKENSTEIN**, which goes one further than *Winter's Tale* in symbolically setting fire to the original novel – or at least the parts of it constituting Victor Frankenstein's journal – on screen. The credits offer "Special thanks to Mary Shelley", who would certainly feel thanked in a very special way by this new pandemonium from the mind of *Underworld* confabulator Kevin Greivoux. The film opens promisingly enough in the Arctic darkness and distance of the novel's last page, with the monster left with his maker's corpse and literary MacGuffin ("Victor's journal is written proof that God is no longer the sole creator of man"), but then drawn into a bizarre gothic war between demons and gargoyles with God-playing scientists in revolt against a scientist-playing God, casually skipping a couple of centuries before the main event as Miranda Otto's gargoyle queen takes on Bill Nighy's galvanic army with the monster and his blonde labcoated hookup caught in the crossfire. "I understand you probably suffered



47 RONIN

severe brain damage during the reanimation process," she tells him at a moment of particularly radical absurdity, and that's certainly the fate of Mary's creation here. Beattie, who was one of the original architects of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise before the Elliot/Rossio takeover, made an exemplary directorial debut with his sensitive 2010 adaptation of John Marsden's Australian YA classic *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, and recycles several of that film's leads in supporting roles. But they haven't been enough to save its resurrected flesh from a tomatometer rating of 96% rotting.

Some key refugees from Beattie's biggest franchise reteam for **47 RONIN**, a high-risk attempt to establish a Hollywood outpost of Chushingura cinema by supernaturalising the events of Ako 1703 on the stylistic, if hardly the tonal, model of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (from which key franchise personnel have been poached, including costume designer Penny Rose and editor Stuart Baird, himself an occasional director of some note whose credits include *Star Trek: Nemesis*), with a Hossein Amini script and a budget well north of \$200m. The latest and most commercially catastrophic casualty of Hollywood's turbulent courtship of the East Asian market, it's turned out a surprisingly respectful and often

beautifully staged treatment of Japan's national legend, notwithstanding Keanu Reeves as a preposterous half-blood second lead, a tremendous cast of Japanese screen legends made to perform in halting English, and a radical reconception of the story as driven by Conan-esque sorcery. (One credit is for "Lovecraftian samurai"). The mass-seppuku ending, which for a long time you fear they may be going to bottle out of, is a tricky sell for western audiences, has had to be tempered with the promise of a *Winter's Tale*-style love beyond death: "My father told me that this world was only a preparation for the next, that all we can hope is to leave it having loved and been loved ... I will search for you through a thousand worlds and ten thousand

lifetimes until I find you." It's a noble undertaking, but hasn't been able to save the film from re-enacting its heroes' fate with Universal's money.

The real truth behind the making of Frankenstein's monster is vouchsafed by Tom Hiddleston's vampire Beat in Jim Jarmusch's **ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE**: "Byron was a pompous ass, but Mary was delicious." Jarmusch's vampires live less like the Cullens than the Burroughses, swinging between Tangier and Detroit in an ever-riskier quest to score uninfected mortal (their term is "zombie") plasma while the world around them slides into chaos. ("Have the water wars started yet, or is it still just about the oil?") With his heightened sense of transience, Hiddleston predicts that the present-day Detroit foreseen by Verhoeven is just a step on the road to something more like the Padilha version: "This place will rise again. When the cities of the south will burn, this place will bloom." For an hour or so nothing much happens: she hangs out with John Hurt's undead and inexplicably aged Kit Marlowe (who all too predictably owns up to ghosting

ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE





MR PEABODY & SHERMAN

Shakespeare), he lurks in his home studio making not terribly good guitar drone music that everybody applauds as wonderful and just happens to be made by Jarmusch's band. But then Mia Wasikowska crashes into their lives from LA ("zombie central") as the vampire version of the maddening and out-of-control houseguest that alternative living inexorably attracts, and soon their cosily decadent lives have been turned irrevocably arse-up. The zombie-bashing elitism gets increasingly offensive, the dialogue is rather clumsy and on-the-nose, and the historical namedropping all a bit middlebrow and retro, with our heroes booking night flights under the names Stephen Daedalus and Daisy Buchanan, and Hiddleston's gallery of hero portraits a student bedroom of countercultural heroes. But the cast are lovely, with Hiddleston and Wasikowska particular standouts, and a film that can stop its climax dead for a five-minute live number by Yasmine Hamdan has some of its priorities in the right place.

History is viewed through figures from ancient myth out of the childhood of the world in **MR PEABODY & SHERMAN**, DreamWorks' reanimation of the fifty-year-old *Rocky & Bullwinkle* segment series about a supersmart

beagle chrononaut who treats his adoptive human son to mildly educational cartoon fun in the original WABAC Machine. None of this means a thing to UK viewers, but it probably doesn't need to, in what comes out as a bewildering defence of innocent familial zoophily in pitting cartoon *Bill & Ted* hijinks with Cleo, Leo, and a horse's-buttload of Greeks against the brutal and speciesist social services who simply want to tear families apart for the joy of it. Though there's a romantic interest for Sherman, the film is primarily interested in the cross-species love of adoptive sons and fathers, particularly in the usual Hollywood absence of anything resembling a mother. But as Leonardo sagely advises, "Children are not machines, Peabody. I know, because I tried to build one. It was creepy." And so, quite comedically, it proves.

THE LEGO MOVIE



Fathers and sons without sisters and moms are the transcendent destination of **THE LEGO MOVIE**, the manic entrance of Warners' new animation arm to the lucrative family market on a tide of intellectual-property hookups between studio, toymaker, and DC. From the Legofied logos to the Wes Anderson credits, nothing about this insane parade of world-hopping set pieces and blink-miss rewind gags stands still long enough to be evaluated for sensemaking. But it's thought deeply if not coherently about the metaphysics of creative play, as the various Lego themed universes turn out themselves to be interlocking elements in a stratified creation whose upper reality is our own world and whose unseen masters are playing out an eternal unseen family drama over the right to invest our toys with the pretence of life. Amid all the family-certificated "mild fantasy violence and very mild language" ("Darn darn darn darn!"), what's at stake is nothing less than every audience member's right to fulfil the prophecy, return with the elixir through the cardboard tube of destiny, and "be the most important, most talented, and most interesting person in the universe". As the earworm says, it's made but it's also true: everything is awesome when you're living a dream.

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